

AMERICAN AGRARIANISM
AND THE
BACK-TO-THE-LAND
MOVEMENT

A Thesis

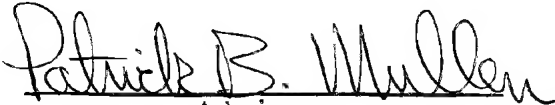
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I would like to thank Pat Mullen for his advisement and interest in the writing of this paper.

And I would like to dedicate this thesis to Chris and our move back to the land.

Scott Barr

Agriculture has become in recent years a popular subject, spurring its share of enthusiasm and controversy. The "farm image," once derided and ridiculed, is now quite fashionable; gardening is the latest vogue in suburbia, barnsiding is the new look in interior decoration, and bib-overalls, flannel shirts, and work boots have transformed many a counter culturite into a facsimile of Farmer Jones. These manifestations of farm fervor are only superficial, but underlying them and giving impetus to their emergence is a very real interest in farming and country life. Several factors have combined to produce this renewed concern. The so-called food shortages may not actually have caused the American Stomach to growl, but when the American Pocketbook is assailed every week by higher prices at the grocery store, many growls are heard indeed. The recent trend of gardening is not just faddish; it reflects a desire of consumers to lessen their dependence on the grocery store syndrome by growing some of their own food. Increasing numbers of new gardeners are becoming intimately aware of the intricacies involved in agricultural production, and a heightened appreciation for the farmer is hastened by every blister that appears on tender hands. Meanwhile, the realities of famine and starvation around the world have begun to intrude on the conscience of our affluent society. People are taking a closer look at American agriculture, hoping to find some answers to our current dilemma.

The outlook, however, is not encouraging. The Green

Revolution, touted in the 1960s by agriculturists as capable of meeting the world's food needs by utilizing crop hybrids, chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and up-to-date machinery, has failed to live up to its expectations. The masses are hungry, but technological agriculture has not been the savior to give them bread and fish. Lending to this failure is the ominous trilogy of concerns which have stymied the nation in the 1970s - economy, energy, and environment. Onlookers examining these three issues have inevitably found that they are highly relevant to modern farming. Agribusiness is intermeshed with our predominately industrial economy, and consequently suffers the throes of inflation, recession, and unemployment. Energy problems likewise effect agricultural production and distribution; high powered tractors do not respond to a bale of hay and a bucket of oats. The environmental problems associated with agriculture include erosion, indiscriminate use of chemicals, pollution, and other forms of land abuse. Thus, we can see that the factors which have evoked the recent interest in agriculture are ones which pertain to American culture as a whole.

The problems which have beset our society are complex ones, and, unfortunately, most of our national leaders, especially those in politics, seem unable or unwilling to offer new direction and initiative towards solving them. People are hungry, and they get promises and rhetoric to chew on. Our wastefully extravagant economy is faltering, and we are urged to buy and use more luxuries. Our supplies of fossil

fuels are dwindling, and potentially dangerous nuclear energy is proposed as the answer. The natural world is being exploited and ravaged, and we find that our leaders in government and industry are the biggest instigators. As the nation approaches its two-hundredth year of existence, a widespread atmosphere of alienation, lethargy, and pessimism looms over the land like a threatening thundercloud.

But hold on. The dire forecasts of doom which confront us daily in the mass media are not the sole outlook in the country today. There are large numbers of people who have decided to seek their own alternatives to the aimlessness of our institutional bureaucracies. They have faced the problems and paradoxes of our culture, especially of our agriculture, and are attempting to solve them in thoroughly independent, practical, and often creative ways. These people are, in effect, part of a movement, perhaps the culmination of the various movements of the 60s. The trend I am referring to is the back-to-the-land movement, sometimes also called the Mother Earth movement, the modern homesteading movement, organiculture, or, by unimpressed critics, a regressive movement towards primitivism. That this movement is more than just an insignificant cult is supported by recent Census Bureau statistics which indicate that rural areas are growing in population faster than urban regions, reversing the rural-to-urban population migration of the decades since World War II.¹ Sociologists believe that a sizeable portion of the people leaving the cities are modern homesteaders. They come to

join the Mother Earth devotees scattered around the countryside who have been a rural fixture for quite some time. And they leave behind city-dwellers who are dedicated to the Mother Earth philosophy, but for one reason or another are not able to move to the country. That the back-to-the-land movement is growing increasingly popular is evidenced by the recent proliferation of literature relating to down-home subjects. Books like Grow It and The Last Whole Earth Catalog and magazines such as Organic Gardening and Farming and The Mother Earth News cater to the interests of the movement.

The characteristics of the back-to-the-land philosophy can be readily surveyed by consulting any one of these publications. Respect for nature is the primary value apparent. Organic agricultural techniques, utilizing natural fertilizers and safe methods of pest control, are exclaimed to be ecologically superior to chemical farming methods. Recycling of resources, a substitute for our throw-away habits, is put into practice through compost piles and the fine art of scavanging. A simple, harmless, sensitive lifestyle in harmony with nature is the ideal. Solar heating, wood-burning stoves, wind and water electrical generating plants, and methane gas generators fueled by manure are seen as practical, ecological answers to the energy shortage. Self-sufficiency is valued as security against an unstable economy. Intensive subsistence farming is an often suggested means of achieving "organic security." Handcrafting and a do-it-yourself attitude go along with the "grow yer own" determination to replace

dependent consumerism. An emphasis on health manifests itself in unprocessed organically grown foods, natural medicines, and a general distrust of anything mass-produced. A sense of community is nurtured and sometimes leads to the establishment of rural communes. But individuality is also a strong value, leading some homesteaders to forsake civilization and head for what wilderness is left in North America. A fatalistic attitude towards the future of the urban-industrial world is common; rural life, on the other hand, is said to be more basic to the necessities of existence, and thus happier, more meaningful, and more virtuous. Mother Earth people have high aspirations for their movement; they hope to be a new brand of pioneer who will rebuild and restore culture on a basis coherent with nature. A hint of utopianism can be seen in the movement, but balancing this are the down-to-earth, unabstract means in which the end is to be achieved.

The philosophy which characterizes the back-to-the-land social pattern is in some ways a radical departure from conventional thought. It embraces the concerns for human rights, peace, and environmental protection which were brought to public attention by the protest movements of the 60s. It, too, is "in revolt against the establishment and the synthetic, plastic world it has created."² But from another, less defensive perspective, the ideas of the movement are contemporary versions of an agrarian way of life which was common in this country for many, many years. Gardening,

hog-butchering, and other things which our grandparents did as a matter of course are now being revived. The Foxfire books are a prime example of the resurgence of interest in the way things were done in the past. Most values of the back-to-the-land movement are ones which proved meaningful for rural people in years gone by, but which have lately been almost exterminated by the far reaching push of our urbanized, industrialized society.

Mother Earth ideology, however, is not just an extension of anti-establishment idealism and homespun wisdom. To a large degree, the development of the philosophy owes a debt to the tradition of agrarianism in American literature. Consciously or unconsciously, people going back to the land in search of a more meaningful existence are following agrarian concepts which have been expounded by our native writers since the first husbandman with a quill and paper set foot on the virgin soil. American writers have been concerned with agriculture and country life for their possibilities both as literary subject matter and as feasible modes of living. M. Thomas Inge presents in his book Agrarianism in American Literature numerous writers who have dealt with agrarian themes. As could be expected, rural life is often depicted sentimentally; the pastoral ideal which defines life in the country as simple, charming, rustic is a dominant theme for many writers. A few, however, are quite belligerent in their rejection of rural ways; in his cryptic essay "The Husbandman," journalist H.L. Mencken raves: "Let the farmer, so far

as I am concerned, be damned forever-more."³ His hostile attitude is typical of many modern critics who, accepting urban-industrial as inevitable and even preferable, deride those who seek to enact the pastoral ideal in their lives. Leo Marx, author of The Machine in the Garden, states that "in the culture at large it [the pastoral ideal] is the starting point for infantile wish-fulfillment dreams, a diffuse nostalgia, and a naive, anarchic primitivism."⁴ Criticisms such as these have been leveled at the back-to-the-land movement, which is trying to reassert the pastoral ideal in America.

The preceding comments demonstrate a deep-rooted conflict between industrial and agrarian ideals, and, as Marx has pointed out, this conflict has found its way into our literature. Agrarian writers from Thomas Jefferson to Henry Thoreau to Louis Bromfield have expressed the opposition in their works, remaining sympathetic towards the agrarian viewpoint. They attempted, with varying degrees of success, to put into practice the concepts of agrarianism which they professed to believe in. They farmed the land for crops as well as themes. In so doing they became prototypes for people who choose to remove themselves from the harsh realities of industrial life.

But one finds a dearth of their counter-parts in contemporary American literature. The Southern Agrarians, whose manifesto I'll Take My Stand advocated a rejection of industrialism in the South in favor of an agricultural economy,

have largely migrated to Northern universities, a move which tends to invalidate their stance for those who insist upon practical agriculture in conjunction with theoretical agrarianism. Other notable modern writers sometimes seem to be victims of the pressures of modern culture. Several have committed suicide, had nervous breakdowns, or been forced into wandering roles of frustrated rebellion. Those who do have inner peace are more likely to have found it in a Buddhist monastery than on an American farm. Many of them seek harmony with nature, but the path they follow meanders across the landscape in an undisciplined, impressionistic course; the sense of place which the farmer knows is foreign to their perceptions. They are united in their condemnation of the tragic shortcomings of our society; visions of collapse, destruction, and damnation sprout from the pages of their works like thorn trees from an abandoned field. Yet it seems to me they fail to propose any workable alternatives to our dilemma.

One significant exception to the rule is Wendell Berry, a farmer, writer, teacher, and citizen who has recently emerged from the farmland of Kentucky to become the foremost agrarian voice in America today. Mr. Berry is well aware of the deficiencies of modern times and the difficulties inherent in restoring a healthy national vigor. He says: "It is certainly possible that the world or human race may come to an end pretty soon. But another possibility - and a much more demanding possibility, too - is that the human race

may continue for thousands of years."⁵ His way of restoration is the patient, reverent way of Chinese peasants who for 6000 years have maintained the fertility of their soil by utilizing organic farming techniques which respect the processes of nature. Berry, rather than using fire and brimstone rhetoric to condemn the barrenness of modern culture, affirms in his literature the possibility of living a decent, constructive life despite the encroachment of a monolithic technological society. His agrarianism is not limited to theorization; he and his family live on a small homestead near Port Royal in Kentucky where they farm and garden organically. Much of his subject matter stems from his experience and perceptions in the rural environment. He is also, as a sort of husbandman of letters, aware of the agrarian tradition in American literature, acknowledging frequently his philosophical debts to Jefferson, Thoreau, and others. Yet because he has made a dedicated commitment to agriculture as both a literary subject and a mode of living in a way which no previous writer has, Berry has become "America's first significant farmer-agrarian."⁶ And more specifically, although perhaps being an individualistic yeoman he would object to being identified with a movement, he is the major spokesman in literature today for the back-to-the-land philosophy. His novels, essays, articles, and poems offer hope, guidance, and inspiration to the ever increasing numbers of people struggling to maintain the agrarian way of life. In the often plundered landscape of present day America, his

works are like a spadeful of rich compost capable of revitalizing the national soil.

In this thesis, I intend to examine selected American writers who have influenced the development of the tenets of the current back-to-the-land philosophy. A basically chronological approach will be taken, beginning with Thomas Jefferson and continuing through Wendell Berry, who will be given a major emphasis by virtue of his position as a current agrarian spokesman, the timeliness of his writings, and his high quality of agrarianism. Throughout, precedence will be given to those authors who seriously practiced what they preached, who for a span of time in their lives put down the pen and picked up a hoe. In choosing what I consider to be a highly "relevant" topic in lieu of a dry "academic" one, I feel it is important to explain the purposes and aspirations of my thesis. One reason I have undertaken this project is personal; as a simultaneous student of literature and of horticulture, I am repeatedly asked how the two disciplines relate, as if they were as different as night and day. By writing on the subject of agrarianism, I hope to demonstrate that literature and agriculture are not only compatible, but complementary. From my position with one foot in the library and one in the field, I can see a basic difference between the two occupational spheres. The literary person is typically an idealist, often to the exclusion of interacting with the world outside of his or her profession. The agricultural person, on the other foot, is a

realist who too often, to the detriment of the earth, brushes aside idealistic concepts like organic farming because they are deemed "impractical" or "unscientific." Both of these poles are one-sided and ultimately static. A further purpose of this paper is to reconcile the disparity between the idealism of literature and the realism of agriculture, for I believe they each have something valuable to contribute to society. Another purpose, to me a primary one, is to recognize and examine the writings of Wendell Berry, who unfortunately is still a somewhat obscure figure despite the excellence of his work. Figuring in his unfamiliarity is the negative reaction of sophisticated critics who have labeled his agrarian stance "irresponsible." This attitude leads one to a fundamental purpose of this thesis: to discern on the basis of past agrarian thought whether or not the back-to-the-land movement is a responsible, viable alternative to the urban-industrial world of present-day America. I hope to show that going back to the land is not a regression away from reality, but a progression towards a saner, more wholesome way of life.

Agrarianism in literature is a tradition which goes far back into the history of Western civilization. Ancient Greeks such as Aristotle, Xenophon, and Hesiod wrote of the values of agriculture. Cato the Censor, a Roman, applauded the virtues of the farmer. He wrote: "It is from the farming class that the bravest men and sturdiest soldiers come ... those who engage in that pursuit are least inclined to be disaffected."¹ The poet Virgil, in the Eclogues, contrasted the pastoral rural simplicity of the Arcadians in Greece to the power and sophistication of city life. The word "Arcadia" thus came to mean any idealistic attempt at a pastoral way of life. Other Roman writers, Cicero, Horace, Pliny, Varro, and Columella among them, praised farming as an honorable and virtuous occupation. In England, Medieval and Renaissance writers venerated agriculture, an attitude which came to a climax in the 18th century when farming became very fashionable among the wealthy upper classes. The "craze" of farming was partly a result of the rise of industrialism, the advent of which threatened agrarian life in an unprecedented manner. From the time when primitive man ceased hunting and turned to cultivation, agriculture had been a way of life for the majority of people. This fact accounts in part for the idealization of rural life by writers - if the majority of people are farmers, it is only human nature, a sort of self-justification, to insist that farming instills the high qualities of honesty, innocence, patience, etc... into those who humbly practice it. In this context, industrialism is quite

naturally attacked by writers and laymen alike; for its characteristics are usually viewed negatively. An emphasis on high profits, displacement of farming class people into overcrowded cities, dehumanization of the individual, billowing smokestacks - these are just a few of the bad aspects of industrialism pointed out by agrarians. The passionate interest in farming of the 18th century English gentry was largely a rebound from the impact of industrialism on the long-held ideals of the people. In practice, British royal and aristocratic classes were the only ones who could afford to establish actual farm estates; the peasants remained on their meager plots of land or, in increasing numbers, migrated to the cities to meet the insatiable demands of the industrial machine. The disintegration of agrarian life for the peasantry led to the widely held belief that by settling in America one could escape the upheaval and establish an American Arcadia. M. Thomas Inge notes that "A myth was ... generated that the European could regain in the New World his lost innocence by a primal relationship with nature."² The lure of the frontier, of virgin soil waiting for a plow, became a pervasive dream in Europe.

Several writers in the colonial period expressed the idea that America was the New Eden. Among them was Jared Eliot, a Connecticut minister and physician whose Essays Upon Field-Husbandry was the first significant book on American agriculture. Although the work was mainly concerned with advice on crop rotation, manuring, and similar practical

matters, it did include sections on the virtues of farming and the basic importance of agriculture in the economy. Eliot distinguished between artificial wealth measured by gold, silver, and diamonds and real, natural wealth measured by grain, fruit, meat, and other agricultural products. This distinction led him to the conclusion that husbandry is the foundation of all wealth. The implication was that in America, with its bountiful resources, a settler could attain prosperity by engaging in farming. Eliot's pragmatic approach to agriculture was supplemented by Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur, a French immigrant who lived on a New York farm from 1754 until the Revolution. Crèvecoeur's Letters from an American Farmer advanced a romantic, idyllic image of rural life. He focused on the positive, admirable traits of the farmer, qualities which he believed arise from the peaceful environment in the country. His book was very popular and influenced many people in Europe that America was indeed the land of pastoral promise.³

The background of agrarianism in Greece, Rome, England, and colonial America gives one a sense of the tradition out of which Thomas Jefferson developed his particular attitudes. He synthesized the ideas of his predecessors into an agrarian philosophy which has earned him the name "the father of American agriculture." That he is simultaneously called "the father of American democracy" is not a splintering of his reputation, for Jefferson, as A. Whitney Griswold says, "is the foremost exemplar of agrarian democracy."⁴ The relation-

ship of the husbandman to the concept of a democratic government was of primary importance to Jefferson; an understanding of his agrarianism is inseparable from an understanding of his political philosophy. Serving as a foundation for his ideology was his practical interest and involvement in farming. He was instrumental in adapting European agricultural techniques, crops, and livestock to the American rural situation. He introduced the threshing machine to this country and developed an improved mold-board plow. He urged the University of Virginia to include courses on agriculture in its curriculum. Throughout his life, farming remained his chosen vocation, politics being a burdensome distraction.

Jefferson, like earlier agrarian writers, had a tendency to idealize rural existence. In Notes on the State of Virginia, his principle agrarian tract, he states in poetic language:

Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth.⁵

One can see in this passage the clear-cut beliefs that nature is the work of God and that the farmer, who constantly interacts with nature, attains through his labors moral virtues. Jefferson's idealization was not merely a boost to the farmer's ego, however. He hoped his affirmation would serve as a stop-gap to the rising flood of industrialism which had begun to threaten the agrarian way of life in the 18th cen-

tury. He deplored the conditions of the industrial transition in France and England. Inherent in his espousal of the virtues of agrarian life is the converse assumption that life in the industrial city is not natural and good. He was vehement in his condemnation of urban centers. "The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body."⁶ By linking the cities with infirmity, he reduced their stature and reinforced his position that country life is strong and healthy.

Jefferson's concern with "pure government" is central to an understanding of his agrarianism. In the early years of the American republic, there was a basic conflict between two opposing views of government. Alexander Hamilton, leader of the Federalists, believed that man is innately selfish and corruptable, and therefore needs authoritarian control. He favored a strong federal government and a predominately commercial-industrial economy. Jefferson, leader of the Republicans, saw man as rational, trustworthy, and in need of minimal control by the state. He advocated a decentralized, local form of government which would rely on the good judgement and intentions of the people. A sort of "natural aristocracy" was expected to evolve from the emerging leadership of individual citizens. And of course, since the farmer was considered to be virtuous, an agrarian economy was favored. The intent of Notes on the State of Virginia was largely to determine how America could best avoid industrial-

ization and thus retain the positive features of a rural culture. Jefferson thought that by producing solely agricultural products to exchange for Europe's manufactured goods, America could avoid the depravities of industry. He said: "let our workshops remain in Europe. It is better to carry provisions and materials to workmen there, than bring them to the provisions and materials, and with them their manners and principles."⁷ Jefferson sought to protect the innocence of the American rural community.

A fundamental component of Jefferson's vision of an agrarian economy was the role of the small farmer and landholder. In addition to his qualities of moral integrity, the yeoman was viewed as valuable to a democratic society for another reason - his independence. The early American rural community was basically self-contained; its links with the outside world were minimal. The farms were mostly small and owned by one family, the exception being certain Southern states where slavery allowed large plantations to be established. In the North and in the expanding frontier, slave labor was non-existent or negligible, and consequently the farms were limited in size because of the short supply of labor. Mechanization had not been developed extensively; the only help the farmer could count on was his wife, his usually numerous children, and his animals. The small family homestead was often involved in subsistence farming in order to supply the necessities for its inhabitants. The family grew, processed, and stored its own food. The women made material and sewed

the clothing. The men made most of the tools and implements necessary for farming. Neighbors helped each other to build houses and barns, husk corn, sew quilts, make maple syrup, and in countless other activities. The local village was an integral part of the rural community. Small businesses catered to the needs of the farmers, the local school educated the youngsters, and the village church served as a social gathering place where one could praise the Lord or complain about the weather. The various components of the community were mutually dependent, yet because of the self-contained nature of the locality, rural people were remarkably independent from the political, economic, and social stresses of the urban-industrial world. Their lives may have been austere and difficult, but their ability to fend for themselves resulted in feelings of freedom and security. The availability of land and the bounty of natural resources in early rural America guaranteed that through diligence and hard work any man (if he was white) could adequately provide for his family. This blessing served to reduce greatly the disparity between social classes which had been so evident in Europe. Farmers as a group were fairly equal. Social equality and economic security were dominant characteristics of the American rural community in the 1800s; the independent, self-reliant yeoman was the personification of Jefferson's concept of a natural aristocracy.

The agrarian way of life became for Jefferson a model for an independent and meaningful culture. He believed that

a country which emphasized agriculture as the fundamental area of its economy would insure the political freedom of its people. For this reason, he asserted that "the small landholders are the most precious part of a state."⁸ He thought that an industrial society, which was intent on manufacturing products so as to realize increasing rates of profit, was incompatible with the ideals of democratic self-government. He was not interested in a linear economic growth, but in a circular, stable pattern of agrarian self-sufficiency. The alternative to a free society based on agriculture seemed undesirable to Jefferson. He said: "Dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition."⁹ By lauding the moral, economic, and social virtues of a culture based on small-scale farming, Jefferson hoped to guide the young American republic towards his vision of an ideal democratic society.

Since the small farm was the backbone of Jefferson's democratic ideology, he believed that it should be protected from the state. The policies which he followed as a politician reflected this concern. As the author of the Declaration of Independence and one of our most influential founding fathers, he continually stood up for the rights of the common man (which at that time was practically synonymous with "farmer"). The determination to insure the liberties of the individual finally resulted in the Bill of Rights. Jefferson, though, as a kind of idealist anarchist, did not look to

governmental authority as the final answer to the problem of personal freedom. He believed that man's relationship with God and the earth, the creator and the creation, is of primary importance and is the ultimate possibility for transcendence and freedom. He deemed his writing of the Virginia Statute of Religious Liberties as one of the major contributions of his life, for it set an early precedent for the guarantee of religious freedom in America. To Jefferson, the cultivation of the soil symbolized man's proper relationship to nature and to God.

Ownership of land was a value of uppermost importance in his philosophy. He accepted philosopher John Locke's theory of natural rights - the idea that the earth is a gift to man from God, and consequently all men have the right to a portion of land for their own sustenance. Both Locke and Jefferson based their beliefs on a Biblical passage found in Psalms 115, verse 16: "The heaven, even the heavens, are the Lord's; but the earth hath he given to the children of men."¹⁰ The implication of this scripture is that men can establish a claim to land by living on it and cultivating it. A title gained by any other means is artificial and morally illegitimate. This ideal shaped Jefferson's view towards private property. Although he recognized the impracticality of equal division of lands, he did try to enact his convictions through legislation and other political maneuvers. He backed laws in his home state which did away with the privileges of entail and primogeniture, aristocratic policies which tended

to concentrate land holdings in the hands of a few wealthy persons. As President in 1803, he questionably authorized the Louisiana Purchase, which greatly increased the amount of land under the jurisdiction of the United States. His purpose was to provide the opportunity for more people to settle the territory and consequently maximize the beneficial effects of small land holders on society as a whole. In an 1804 letter to Jean Baptiste Say, he explained that the "immense extent of uncultivated and fertile lands enables every one who will labor, to marry young, and to raise a family of any size. Our food, then, may increase geometrically with our laborers, and our births, however multiplied, become effective."¹¹ He had in mind the problem of food shortages in Europe and the situation in America, but, as always, his practical concerns were backed by a cogent philosophy. His political decisions were often motivated by a desire to better the plight of his favorite constituency - the small-scale farmers.

Thus, the agrarianism of Thomas Jefferson was transmitted from philosophical theory to political actuality. He believed in the fundamental value of agriculture to a society, the moral virtues of rural existence, and the social benefit of yeomen whose feet are planted firmly in their own land. His beliefs comprised the agrarian vision which foresaw an ideal culture that fulfilled man's basic hopes for security, equality, freedom, and a meaningful life. Unfortunately, Jefferson's version of an American Arcadia was

never realized. Even while Notes on the State of Virginia was being composed, industrialism had begun to creep into America in the forms of manufacturing and commerce. The economic disadvantages of relying on Europe for industrial goods proved to be too high a price to pay for the simple virtues of farming. As two modern sociologists have said, "the American Republic's growth nullified Jefferson's aspirations."¹² Hamilton's insistence on an industrial economy began to emerge as the expediency of the nation, and coupled with it came the gradual but unrelenting increase in the power of the federal bureaucracy, which in turn led to a diminishment in individual freedom and responsibility. Jefferson saw the abandonment of his ideal, and to some extent compromised himself to it. He said in later life that the sentiments he expressed in Notes were "theory only" and that he advocated a balance of agriculture and industry. This revised stance showed his pragmatic empiricism; in an 1802 letter, he said: "What is practicable must often countrol what is pure theory, and the habits of the governed determine in a great degree what is practicable."¹³

Although the evolution of an urban-industrial society in America has subverted Jefferson's dream of an agrarian culture, his ideals have continued to inspire many people. Several critics have said that his lingering influence has blocked modern social progress. Henry Nash Smith in Virgin Land maintains that the idealization of rural ways has resulted in regressive political practices, for example,

governmental support of agricultural prices. He also criticizes the inordinate power of the farm bloc in Congress.¹⁴ Sociologists Rohrer and Douglas are likeminded; they say that "Jefferson's concept of agrarian democracy may have been somewhat illusory."¹⁵ Other critics join in the fracas; they see Jefferson as the culprit who inserted the agrarian joists under the superstructure of our government. These experts have examined the foundation of our nation and claim it is unsuitable for supporting the great bulk of industrial civilization.

But there is another side to the issue. There are many people today, and there have been many in the past, who are convinced that the agrarian concepts which were a basic material in the building of our country are still sound and reliable. If the towering national edifice constructed by industrialism appears to be tottering, they insist, it is because it is too far away from the earth. The people involved in the back-to-the-land movement build close to the ground and are confident that the deliberate workmanship of Jefferson has placed a firm, hand-hewn foundation under their lives. Like their mentor, they distrust the processes of urbanization and industrialization, preferring instead the tried and true processes of nature. Agriculture is seen as the best relationship between people and the natural world, and engaging in gardening or farming activities is still thought to be a means of cultivating the virtues of patience, humility, compassion, trust, and so on. Despite the widespread publicity of rural communes, I think that the small, family

farm is the most sought after objective of those who want to live in the country. Ads in The Mother Earth News indicate that a few acres upon which a self-sufficient existence can be developed and a family can be raised seem to be much in demand. People aspiring to move to the country value the agrarian life as a relevant means of expressing and practicing their place in the cycle of life. Homesteading is seen as a note^{of} sanity and stability in an unsettled, anxious world. Jefferson's belief in the fundamental value of agriculture in a society is an underlying concept for the modern yeoman and yeowoman. In some respects, Jefferson exemplifies the frontier mentality which led to the perversion of the American Dream; the idea that a steadily increasing population could be supported by America's unlimited resources is now recognized as foolish and dangerous. But the general pattern of small-scale farming which Jefferson championed has been his overriding contribution to the Mother^{Earth} philosophy. Along with his other titles, he could be called "the father of the back-to-the-land movement."

On July 4, 1845, while most of his neighbors were attending Independence Day festivities in Concord, Henry David Thoreau moved his few belongings to a hut he had built on the shore of Walden Pond. He had previously lived in the village at the home of Ralph Waldo Emerson, doing odd jobs, writing a few poems and essays, and trying to find the best way of "getting a living." When Emerson offered his property by the pond as a homesite, Thoreau quickly accepted, for the opportunity gave him a chance to put into practice the ideas he had been formulating since his graduation from Harvard in 1837. He had rejected the orthodox occupations of a Harvard graduate; preaching was against his religion, law and medicine were too institutionalized for his liking, business he abhorred, and his brief stint of public teaching ended when he refused to whip his students. He wanted to live the life of a poet, free and unencumbered. In Walden, the personal testament of his experience at the pond, he said: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."¹

Today, one hundred and thirty years after Thoreau went to the woods, these words are the inspiration for many people who are rejecting the loud desperation of modern society and going back to the land in search of a more basic and deliberate life. Thoreau has become a hero for the Mother Earth movement; his frugal, unapologetic life at Walden Pond is

hallowed as a symbol of an ideal existence in coherence with nature. Thoreau's succinct philosophy, expressed in his writings, is seen as highly relevant to the problem of how to conduct oneself in the maze of modern society. His thoughts are quoted on subjects ranging from vegetarianism to architecture to the worthiness of patches on clothing. His judgment is viewed as very credible, for he was a man who tested his theoretical ideas against the practical realities of life. But in dealing with the practicalities, he consistently injected his highminded, transcendent outlook which gave meaning and purpose to the workaday aspects of living. His attitude was uplifting, yet down-to-earth. As the sage of the back-to-the-land movement, Thoreau's example has influenced many people to attempt an ideal relationship with nature bolstered by a realistic, common-sense approach to life.

In retrospect, Thoreau's pilgrimmage to Walden Pond proceeded from the widespread American desire for a pastoral existence which had characterized the works of Jefferson and other early writers. As we have seen, the agrarian culture which Jefferson preferred had begun to be usurped by industrialism even in his own time. The Age of Tools, of handcrafting and hand labor, had by the first few decades of the 19th century started to yield to the Age of the Machine. Factories became more prevalent, cities grew in size and number, mechanization became commonplace, and the railroad was introduced as the ultimate manifestation of society's progress. The Industrial Revolution was in its first stages

of ascendancy. And if in the process it rode roughshod over the Jeffersonian ideals of rural contentment and natural harmony, that did not seem to bother many people. As Leo Marx says, "everyone knows that the great majority of Americans welcomed the new technology ... they grasped and panted and cried for it."² The initial fascination with machinery is understandable, for mechanization helped to ease exhausting physical labor and promised a prosperous and relaxed standard of living. It also offered to some exploitive entrepreneurs the chance to get rich quick. Judging from the ease at which industrialism became rooted in the American soil and the extent to which it so rapidly spread, it seems that most people thought it to be a beneficial organism worthy of cultivation, and not a pesky weed.

Thoreau, however, sensed that there was an inherent contradiction in pursuing rural fulfillment via the route of mechanization. He removed himself to Walden Pond in order to skirt an increasingly mechanistic, materialistic society and to establish his version of the ideal rural life. He was not the first intellectual, though, to take this course. In 1841, Brook Farm was established as an ideal agrarian oasis where philosophical precepts could be followed in natural surroundings conducive to serene contemplation. As a utopian experiment, however, Brook Farm fell short of its goals. The idealists at the farm soon discovered that their philosophical theories did not allow for the hard work and agricultural expertise needed to sustain them in the country.

In The Blithedale Romance, Nathaniel Hawthorne ruefully wrote: "Intellectual activity is incompatible with any large amounts of bodily exercise."³ Apparently his artistic consciousness did not rise at the same rate as the blisters on his hands. He continued: "The yeoman and the scholar ... are two distinct individuals, and can never be melted into one substance."⁴ Hawthorne implied that farming is an occupation for men of lesser intelligence; the true scholar is out of place on the farm and requires more gentle surroundings to nurture his creativity. Fruitlands, another utopian community of the day, met with similar difficulties. Bronson Alcott founded the agricultural society in 1842. Thirty-one years later, his daughter, Louisa May Alcott, wrote a parody of Fruitlands entitled "Transcendental Wild Oats." She criticized their mystical, unknowledgeable approach to rural life. "The garden was planted with a generous supply of roots and herbs; but, as manure was not allowed to profane the virgin soil, few of these vegetable treasures ever came up."⁵ The fertilizer of their lofty ideals was ^{not} sufficient to grow crops. On the whole, the utopian communities of the mid 19th century were failures, a fact which sobered later enthusiasts pursuing an ideal country life.

Thoreau was intrigued by the utopian experimentation going on in his time; the idea of a pastoral alternative attracted him because he saw it as an opportunity to freely live the kind of natural existence which he had come to believe was the true path to enlightenment. Many of the

attitudes towards man and nature which guided the Utopians and strongly influenced Thoreau were expressed by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Leading spokesman of the Transcendentalists, Emerson's essay "Nature" was the most important pastoral document of the day. Thoreau read the essay while a student at Harvard and was deeply effected by its message. The essay held that the self-reliant individual can transcend the conformity and artificiality of society by engaging in an intimate, essentially mystical relationship with nature. Ultimately, mind and spirit, the disembodied "I", should disengage completely from the physical world, including nature, and rise to the higher realms of Truth and Wisdom. A kind of Transcendental Nirvana was the goal. The yogic Emerson, a scholarly intellectual, respected people who work and live close to nature. In an essay called "Farming," he idealized the farmer, comparing him to Adam, the noble Indian, and Homer's heroes, Agamemnon and Achilles.⁶ Emerson believed that the rough naturalness of rural people is a quality which holds the potential for spiritual refinement.

In his talented friend Henry Thoreau, Emerson saw elements of both the natural man and the intellectual man. He extended his tutelage in hopes that Thoreau would become the embodiment of Transcendental principles, a true American Scholar. But Thoreau, stubborn and individualistic, was a follower of no path but his own inner bent. He gratefully accepted Emerson's proposition to squat at Walden Pond, but the terms of his life were not dictated by his elder's expectations.

Rather than striving to fulfill Emerson's ambitions, Thoreau preferred to be out a-huckleberrying.

Emerson and Thoreau, despite their differences in temperament, shared the view that there is a fundamental dichotomy between society and the individual. They recognized that American thought, reflected in the democratic ideal, embodies a paradox: individuality is valued, but when private thought of action runs against the public grain, the masses expect and even demand acquiescence. For Thoreau especially, the conflict between how society expected him to behave and how he intended to behave was a hard-fought contest. Thoreau was the essence of non-conformity. When Harvard regulations required him to wear a black coat to chapel, he wore a green one. While the majority of his townsmen held down a steady job, he wandered around the countryside observing nature. He refused to pay taxes to a government he considered immoral and unjust, and spent a night in jail for his obstinancy. Examples of Thoreau's rebellion against society abounded throughout the course of his life.

In Walden, Thoreau elaborated his opinions towards society. He regarded his Concord neighbors with a critical eye, and what he saw usually made him wince. "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation,"⁷ he said, and attributed that situation to people's willingness to unthinkingly accept the common way of living without trying any new approaches to life. Mired in society's traditions, people,

Thoreau said, cannot free themselves from the injustices and immoralities which have over the years been accumulated.

He thought it ironic that a society which claimed to be so pious was actually the perpetrator of wrongness. He wrote: "The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of anything it is very likely to be my good behavior. What demon possessed me that I behaved so well?"⁸

One aspect of society which Thoreau believed to be particularly demonic was the trend of mechanization. He thought that the machinery used in his day was dehumanizing; it served to break down the direct relationship of men to the world and consequently degraded their lives. "But lo!" he said, "men have become the tools of their tools."⁹ The ultimate symbol of mechanization for Thoreau was the railroad. According to him, society had constructed a metal monster, stood in the tracks to admire its work, and gotten run over for its trouble. Along with the railroad, they had built an industrial destiny which would not swerve from its course. Thoreau wrote: "We have constructed a fate, an Atropos, that never turns aside. (Let that be the name of your engine.)"¹⁰ Thoreau saw the railroad as a portent of the impact industrialism would have upon our culture. He lamented the fact that society's mechanistic outlook, in its headlong route down the tracks, failed to even consider the spiritual needs of humanity.

Thoreau's alternative to the negative qualities he saw in society was an assertion of his own individuality. Rather

than blindly conforming to the traditional norms of society, he advocated relying on personal intuition and conscience as the guidelines for determining appropriate action. "Old deeds for old people, and new deeds for new,"¹¹ he said. He thought that the individual seeking truth and enlightenment must step out of society's ruts and forge a new path through life. Thoreau also proposed that instead of getting run over by the train of mechanization, the perceptive person should get off the tracks, reject the machine mentality, and live in a way that is a boon to the soul and to the world, not a bane.

Thoreau's withdrawal to Walden Pond was his way of disengaging himself from the negative aspects of society in order to assert his individuality in a positive manner. He said: "My purpose in going to Walden Pond was not to live cheaply nor to live dearly there, but to transact some private business with the fewest obstacles."¹² His "business" was an experiment in trail-blazing; he sought to scrutinize his mode of living, determine what values were most important, and apply them in a practical and straightforward way. By removing himself from civilization, he hoped to sidestep society and discover what life is really about.

The utopian communities begun in the early 1840s similarly withdrew from society and went to live in an out-of-the-way rural setting. But Thoreau went to the woods alone; he weaned himself from society in any form. He said: "I never found the companion that was so companionable as

solitude."¹³ Of course, Thoreau was not totally reclusive; he often journeyed to the village or was visited at his hut by friends and various other people. But by and large, his time was spent by himself. At the pond, Thoreau was able to read, write, work in his bean field, or observe and study nature. Gradually, left to his own devices, he began to better understand himself and the world around him. He re-integrated himself externally with the environment and internally with the soul. He became one with the universal flow of being. Joel Porte offers that Thoreau's solitude enabled him to fulfill an ideal of self-culture, an expansion and blossoming of the real inner self.¹⁴ Thoreau believed that a real community involves individuals who have communed with nature and with their own souls. He lived alone in the community of the earth.

Thoreau's move to Walden Pond was prompted by economic as well as spiritual considerations. He had come to believe that one of the chief ills of society was its materialistic economy. He criticized people who clamored after elaborate shelter, food, and clothing and in their haste missed the true substance of life. He said: "Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind."¹⁵ As an individual, Thoreau wanted to reduce his life to the basics, and he saw his life at the pond as a chance to discover what a frugal personal economy would entail. He said: "It would be some advantage to live

a primitive and frontier life, though in the midst of an outward civilization, if only to learn what are the gross necessities of life and what methods have been taken to obtain them."¹⁶ Thoreau's ideal was a sort of Indian-style self-sufficiency - living off of the land, supporting oneself by utilizing the natural bounty of the earth. He was against private ownership of land; nature, he thought, should be enjoyed but not possessed. The best economy, to his way of thinking, is one which, by its unobtrusive demands, allows one free rein to pursue the higher meanings of life. Thoreau exclaimed: "Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb nail."¹⁷ The riches which Thoreau garnered by living simply were far more valuable than those he might have acquired by speculating in society's materialistic business.

Thoreau felt that the economic and spiritual aspects of life are intricately joined; his ideas about economy take into consideration abstract spiritual needs, his ideas about spiritual transcendence do not ignore economic practicalities. At Walden Pond, in a natural environment, Thoreau was able to reconcile the abstract with the practical. This was not accidental; his attitudes towards society, individualism, economics, or any other area of life hinged on his conception of nature and man's relationship to it.

As has been said, Thoreau based many of his ideas about

nature on Emerson's famous essay. But, even though they shared a common intellectual conception of nature, their individual approaches to nature were decidedly different. Emerson's interaction with nature took the form of a broad survey which provided a background for lofty thought. Thoreau, on the other hand, was fascinated by natural detail and processes. Ellery Channing sometimes joined Emerson and Thoreau on walks around the Concord area, and he noticed the contrast between his companions. Emerson, he said, would saunter along with his hands linked behind his back, gazing meditatively into the sky. Thoreau, meanwhile, would be scurrying around on his hands and knees, excitedly observing minute plants and insects. This anecdote underlines the fundamental difference between Emerson and Thoreau. Emerson wrote idealistically about nature, but his actual knowledge of it was limited, and he never really put into practice the ideals he expounded. Thoreau was more concise in his writings about nature, and what he said was based on first-hand experience. When he surveyed the Concord countryside, he did not overlook and bypass the fine points of the natural world in his search for the boundaries of spiritual transcendence.

Thoreau loved the beauty of nature and believed that men would always be happier when surrounded by natural scenery. But his appreciation went beyond appearances. As a pioneer ecologist, Thoreau understood the intricate processes of birth, growth, reproduction, death, decay, and rebirth which link the myriad parts of the world to the cycle of life.

Because of his understanding, Thoreau was able to rise above his self-consciousness and identify with nature. Walden is a celebration of his oneness with the natural world. "The indescribable innocence and beneficence of Nature - of sun, and wind, and rain, of summer and winter - such health, such cheer, they afford forever! ... Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?"¹⁸ Thoreau's juxtaposition of "leaves" and "vegetable mould" show that he was aware of the balance between growth and decay, life and death. Man's existence is conditional; we live, but must be prepared to return to the dust. Thoreau does not despair at this thought, though. He accepts the fact of death and rejoices that it gives rise to rebirth and renewal.

In one particularly transcendent passage in Walden, Thoreau observes a deep cut in the earth made by the railroad. The thawing spring sun has partially melted the sand and clay, and it flows down the bank in streams, interlacing and overlapping. The forms which the swirling kaleidoscope of earth take remind Thoreau of leaves, or bird's feet, or animal paws, or any number of objects. He sees the beauty of the spectacle and likens it to the creative processes of nature which occur over all of the world. "...I stood in the laboratory of the Artist who made the world and me - had come to where he was still at work, sporting on this bank, and with excess of energy strewing his fresh designs about."¹⁹ Although Thoreau views destruction all about him - in the

mechanistic society whose railroad wounded the earth and in the natural process of death and decay -, he optimistically dwells on the creative, restorative process as a symbol of the true, lasting nature of the universe. In the natural creativity of the earth Thoreau saw immortality. Correspondingly, the book which he created - Walden - has become an enduring and honored scripture for those who share his deep feelings towards nature.

Although Thoreau valued nature for its own sake, he also believed that man's role is of the utmost importance in nature. In his descriptions of nature, he always brought in how he himself or people in general related to the scene. Meaning and value, he thought, can be apprehended by the person sensitive to the world around him. But natural facts and perceptions were not the end which Thoreau sought. He was finally concerned with the ability of man to rise above the physical level of nature to a higher spiritual plane of consciousness. To gain transcendence, Thoreau felt that one must go to nature, be quiet, and reverently receive the lessons which she teaches.

Thoreau's interaction with nature at Walden Pond was not wholly a matter of observation and inspiration. His life at the pond also included the cultivation of a field of beans and other vegetables. Thoreau undertook the chores of a husbandman as an experiment to test whether or not the agrarian life so many of his neighbors lived was all it was cracked up to be. Near his hut, as he described it in "The Bean Field"

chapter of Walden, Thoreau planted beans, corn, potatoes, turnips, and peas. The beans, a small white bush variety, were his major cash crop, "the length of whose rows, added together, was seven miles already planted."²⁰ He commonly worked in his field for seven hours in the morning, although sometimes he tarried into the afternoon. Thoreau's gardening, rather than being the play of an artist, was a demanding undertaking, as anyone knows who has ever tended over two acres of vegetables singlehandedly. When he said: "I was determined to know beans," the reader can rest assured that after a summer of hoeing, he did.

Thoreau's attitudes towards society, economy, and nature came to focus in his view towards farmers and agriculture. Typical of his stance as a non-conformist, Thoreau did not want to be a successful farmer like many of his neighbors, for their gauges of success did not measure the yields which he hoped to harvest. Throughout Walden, he criticized greedy, ignorant, possessive farmers. Speaking of farmer Flint, Thoreau bristles with disgust: "I respect not his labors, his farm where everything has its price, who would carry the landscape, who would carry his God, to market, if he could get anything for him; who goes to the market for his god as it is; on whose farm nothing grows free, whose fields bear no crops, whose meadows no flowers, whose trees no fruits, but dollars; who loves not the beauty of his fruits, whose fruits are not ripe for him till they are turned to dollars."²¹ At other points in Walden, Thoreau characterized farmers as victims

of society too overloaded by their barns, houses, machinery, livestock, and other possessions to live noble and free lives. He believed that farmers, like other members of society, are too poor spiritually because they are too rich materially. He dispensed with the Jeffersonian ideal of the virtuous husbandman; near Concord, at least, few of these were to be found.

Thoreau went beyond the farmer to diminish the importance of agriculture itself, thus bursting another traditional agrarian concept. His agricultural experience "was on the whole a rare amusement, which, continued too long, might have become a dissipation."²² He was not concerned with adhering to standard farming practices; he added no fertilizer to his field, relying instead on the songs of the birds to nourish his crops. Perhaps this explains why he made only \$8.71¹/₂ on his produce. Thoreau, however, did not regard this as bad farming, but as good living. He thought that too much emphasis was placed on agriculture and not enough on self-culture. "But why should not the New Englander try new adventures, and not lay so much stress on his grain, his potato and grass crop, and his orchards - raise other crops than these?"²³ Thoreau's bean field, rather than an insult to agriculture, was a compliment to nature and to his own worth as a man. In the final analysis, he valued the dells, the ponds, the woods, and the pastures more than the fields cultivated for agricultural production. If his beans rotted in the ground or were eaten by woodchucks, he was not above eating the purslane

which grew in their place, and perhaps felt more of a natural man for it.

But if, as Leo Marx says, Thoreau "strips native agriculture of its meretricious rhetorical disguise,"²⁴ it also seems clear that he avoided being one-sided and found some real positive value in the practice of agriculture. The joys and satisfactions of raising a crop with one's hands were not overlooked by Thoreau, who said: "I came to love my rows, my beans, though so many more than I wanted. They attached me to the earth, and so I got strength like Antaeus."²⁵ He appreciated the beauty to be observed by the farmer, too, both of his crops ("It is a fine broad leaf to look on."²⁶) and of the sun, trees, wild plants, and birds around him.

Thoreau worked his beans by hand, unaided by animals, other men, or time-saving implements. In his labor, though sometimes approaching drudgery, he saw the virtues of patience, perserverance, and pride in workmanship, qualities worth cultivating in an artist as well as a farmer. He said of labor: "It has a constant and imperishable moral, and to the scholar it yields a classic result."²⁷ In one of my favorite passages in literature, Thoreau mildly satirized the act of hoeing weeds, a farming labor which only the frequent participant can truly appreciate. It also shows the sense of humor which Thoreau took with his to his bean field. He wrote:

Consider the intimate and curious acquaintance one makes with various kinds of weeds - it will bear iteration in the account, for there was no little iteration in the labor - disturbing their delicate organizations so ruthlessly, and making such invidious distinctions

with his hoe, leveling whole ranks of one species, and sedulously cultivation another. That's Roman wormwood, that's pigweed, that's sorrel, that's spider-grass - have at him, chop him up, turn his roots upward to the sun, don't let him have a fiber in the shade, if you do he'll turn himself t'other side up and be as green as a leek in two days. A long war, not with cranes, but with weeds, those Trojans who had sun and rain and dews on their side. Daily the beans saw me come to their rescue armed with a hoe, and thin the ranks of their enemies, filling up the trenches with weedy dead. Many a lusty crest-waving Hector, that towered a whole foot above his crowding comrades, fell before my weapon and rolled in the dust.²⁸

Thoreau came to the country to find enjoyment and fulfillment. His agrarian experiment was successful in this respect; he held out the possibility that other farmers could buck the frenzied, profit-oriented system and do the same.

Thoreau said that in days-gone-by agriculture was a sacred calling, a mystical, worshipping relationship between the farmer and the earth. In such a reverent relationship, nature was looked upon as a divine benefactor, the source of all blessings. Thoreau adopted this attitude towards the world, and he believed that the farmer should likewise accept nature for what it is, even if this means a partially empty larder. He wrote: "The true husbandman will cease from anxiety, as the squirrels manifest no concern whether the woods will bear chestnuts this year or not, and finish his labors with every day, relinquishing all claim to the produce of his fields, and sacrificing in his mind not only his first but his last fruits also."²⁹ Only by learning to give up the harvest of his labor to the world can the farmer lay aside his pretensions and enter into the natural community

of life.

Thoreau's influence on the philosophy of the back-to-the-land movement has been extensive. His critical attitudes towards society are shared with people today who condemn our materialistic urban-industrial culture, our unjust government, and our profit-oriented agri-business establishment. His individualistic rejection of society and migration to the countryside is seen as a model example of alternative living. People today are going back to the rural areas of the country in order to escape the conformity of the suburbs and live according to the dictates of their own individual preferences. Creativity and originality are highly valued, sometimes to the point of eccentricity. But new ideas towards architecture, energy, farming, and other areas have come from the movement, proving that a dose of individuality can stimulate people.

Thoreau's economic ideals have also been adopted, in a somewhat revised form. Leading a simple life based on the necessities is a dominant aspiration of the movement. But determining how necessities like water, food, heat, shelter, and clothing can best be secured in today's world often becomes a complicated and demanding task. Building a spring house, growing a garden and raising livestock, planning and constructing a solar-heated home, and sewing one's own clothing - these or other methods of attaining the necessities require skill, determination, and resourcefulness. Over the years people have come to rely on conveniences such as electricity, factory-made clothing, and store-bought food.

In order to simplify life today, one must be willing to take on inconveniences and impositions. People in the back-to-the-land movement accept this challenge, for they agree with Thoreau that a simplified life can be more abundant in spiritual pleasures.

Thoreau's attitude towards nature has been the most important legacy he left to the world. His positive, reverent outlook towards the earth has inspired many people to view nature in ways which ask how it can best be used and preserved. Organic farmers today emulate Thoreau's belief that agriculture should be coherent with nature.

There are some ways in which the movement takes issue with Thoreau's ideas. Not many people today have the opportunity to squat on someone else's land, so ownership is accepted and desired. Also, few people are willing to forego the responsibilities and satisfactions of family life in order to live a simple life alone in the woods.

But the ideals behind Thoreau's actions are the most important thing to the back-to-the-land movement. His conviction that idealism is not out of place in the world if it is supported by action and work is highly respected. He said: "If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them."³⁰ To people whose "castles in the air" are a homestead in the country, these words are mighty welcome.

In 1861, the Civil War broke out, signalling a turning point in American agrarian history. The issues which led to the war were complex, but one of the basic conflicts was between the industrial interests of the North and the agricultural interests of the South. Industry and agriculture had been pitted against each other in America since the time of Hamilton and Jefferson, and the discrepancy between the two, intensified by the questions of slavery and state's rights, finally resulted in civil strife and violence. The victory of the North was largely due to its monopoly of factories and industrial raw materials, enabling it to manufacture war supplies. The South, whose economy was mainly agricultural, was unable to counter this critical advantage. Without supplies, the Confederacy was paralyzed and defeat was assured. Lee's surrender at Appomattox was more than a military reconciliation; it symbolized the powerful dominance of industry over agriculture in America.

The outcome of the war turned America in the direction of industrial progress. Spurred by new mechanical inventions, abundant resources, and cheap labor, the stampede towards an urban-industrial society took off in full force. Left behind in the dust was the small farmer. The years after the war were hard times for agriculture in general, but for the small-scale husbandman, they were often fatal.¹ Soil exhausted from years of mis-use reduced the quality of life on small, self-contained farms. Subsistence farming gradually began to die out, yielding to the trend of producing food

for the urban markets. But crop overproduction made prices low, and the small farmer could not compete with larger operations able to afford machinery and hired hands. The government, increasingly stocked by businessmen rather than yeomen, did not see fit to protect the small farmer. In the push towards industrialization, the small farmer, since he produced no significant material benefits for society, was viewed as dead weight. Mentally and economically beat, many farmers abandoned their homes, moved to the cities, and grabbed the tail of the speeding industrial beast. The demise of the small farmer continued as a cultural trend up until the recent resurgence of small-scale homesteading.

The agrarian ideal, however, did not fade away. Despite the steady rural-to-urban migration, many farmers remained in the country and adjusted to the changing times. In fact, some city people dissatisfied with their lives went back to the country and attempted to make a go at farming. While browsing through books on agriculture at the library, I ran across a small book written by James Miller called Ten Acres Enough (A Practical Experience showing how a very Small Farm may be made to keep a very Large Family with Extensive and Profitable Experience in the Cultivation of the Smaller Fruits).² Written in 1864, the book was apparently very popular, going through twenty-six editions. Miller advocated intensively cultivating small farms; the substance of his ideas is similar to the ideas found in present-day back-to-the-land literature. He realistically wrote of the pleasures and hardships

of rural life. He declared that wise farming practices involve a respect for nature and a willingness to work with, rather than against, her. He extolled the values of manure, mulches, and insect-eating birds. He wanted to be as self-sufficient as possible, but he depended on the income he earned from selling his home-grown fruits to nearby city markets to buy anything he could not produce himself. Miller was optimistic about the prospects of living comfortably and happily on a small farm. He thought the future of American agriculture would be exciting and prosperous. He did not foresee that the links with the city which he found so profitable would eventually cause profound problems for the rural communities of America.

Another more literary writer who celebrated agrarian life in the years following the war was Walt Whitman. The poetry he wrote frequently praised country living in the wide-open, aggressive, absorbing style which was distinctively his own. Leaves of Grass, his life's work, imparts to the reader the sense as well as the essence of rural America - the smell of sweating farmers in a hay field, the sound of a threshing machine, the sight of a barn as well as an insight into neighborliness, humor, determination, perseverance, and other traits of farm folk. In Democratic Vistas, a prose tract, Whitman envisioned the possibility of a self-sufficient, self-sustaining agrarian community, a harmony of "farming, building, trade, courts, mails, schools, elections, all attended to" where strong, self-reliant people could be "exercised propor-

tionally in body, mind, and spirit."³ Whitman believed that American democracy offered conditions under which such communities could flourish. He advised putting aside aristocratic, pretentious, literary ideals and embracing instead the ideals sacred to common, wholesome men and women. Although Whitman, whose home was in New York, was a visitor to and not a resident in nature, the forcefulness of his thought relating to the land and the people of his day has had a major impact on American agrarianism.

Whitman's confident yawp, though, was not enough to silence the bitter criticism of farm life contained in the writings of American realists.⁴ These writers, emerging in the late 1800s, sought to deflate the rustic idylls of romantic literature. They attempted to expose the agrarian myth by depicting the harsh realities of farm life. One of the most adamant of the realists was Hamlin Garland. Raised on a farm in the Midwest, he left the country as a young man and went to Boston, then the literary center of America. From his desk in the city, he wrote bitterly of the life he had abandoned. In Main-Travelled Roads, a collection of stories based on his experiences, Garland condemned farm life for "its sordidness, dullness, triviality, and its endless drudgeries."⁵ In one of the stories, a farmer weary from years of back-breaking work says: "Anything under God's heavens is better'n farmin'."⁶ This attitude may have been widespread among farmers of the time who were constantly forced to struggle in order to get along. The image of the independent, virtuous, contented

yeoman began to be replaced in the public consciousness (thanks to bad economic conditions and the anti-agrarian realists) by the image of an ignorant, shiftless, slovenly country hick. This negative attitude towards the farmer persists even today; urban sophisticates often tend to stereotype and look down upon country people. Although Garland and other realists perhaps hoped only to present a straightforward, unsentimental account of life as they saw it, their prejudices against farmers and rural life set the tone for 20th century society's outlook towards the country.

As the plight of the farmer just before the turn of the century worsened, political solutions were proposed for agrarian problems. In 1889, the Populist Party was formed, intending to represent the farmer in the state and federal governments. But its grass-roots approach to politics was unsuccessful. Organizations such as the Grange and the Farmer's Alliance attempted through collective bargaining to pressure the government into helping farmers. But many individualistic farmers did not join these groups, thus undermining their efforts. Political involvement did help in some instances, though. The latter 19th century saw several pro-agrarian policies, including the Homestead Act, the formation of the Department of Agriculture, and the establishment of land-grant colleges, agricultural experiment stations, and county extension services.⁷ These policies proved to be great benefits to the farm community. They implemented the dissemination of information and supported agricultural research.

In the case of the Homestead Act, the small farmer was directly assisted in attaining land suitable for his purposes. In the last few decades the initial benefits these policies offered to the small farmer have been somewhat qualified; unclaimed lands for homesteading have been practically nonexistent for years, and the large-scale, highly mechanized, chemical dependant farms of modern agri-business receive most of the agricultural establishment's attention. But at the time of their initiation in the late 19th century, the governmental acts were instrumental in helping many small-scale farmers to survive the hard times which afflicted them.

The erosion of traditional agrarian ideals prompted by economic hardships and derogatory public attitudes served to wash away much of the enthusiasm with which people had previously viewed rural life. A pessimistic mood settled over the farm scene in the early 20th century. Realistic literature had had its impact; nature was no longer seen as a holy link between man and the divine, but as the defining, restricting factor in man's existence. A writer who expressed this changed outlook towards nature was Robert Frost. Unlike other writers of his day, Frost did not flagrantly decry rural life, in fact, he lived on various New England farms during most of his life. His poems are full of pastoral images, as the titles suggest: "Mowing", "After Apple-Picking", "Birches", "Mending Wall", etc.... His pastoralism is not romantic in its intent, though; that is, it does not lend itself to transcendent spiritual-mystical experiences. Instead, the pastoral

images in Frost's poetry show ways that people are restrained and thwarted by indifferent, and in later poems, malevolent natural forces. For example, in the poem "Out, Out-", the boy's prospects for longevity and contentment in the mountains of Vermont are spoiled by a freak accident which ends his life. Frost believed that nature, rather than a benevolent friend, was an unfeeling stranger to man, randomly letting him pass or tripping him up. If his attitude seems unconventional for a farmer who necessarily works with nature, this is possibly because Frost was not really a farmer at heart. He lived in the country and transferred the sights, sounds, and smells of his surroundings into his poems, but ultimately he was detached from the earth.

While Robert Frost was harvesting poems from the New England landscape, a band of literary desperadoes was attacking American industrial society from its southern underbelly. The Southern Agrarians, including John Crow Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, and nine other writers, condemned in their joint book I'll Take My Stand the trend towards industrialization which threatened the agrarian culture of the South. Invoking Jeffersonian ideals, they stated "The theory of agrarianism is that the culture of the soil is the best and most sensitive of vocations, and that therefore it should have the economic preference and enlist the maximum number of workers."⁸ From this premise they went on to elaborate on various issues relevant to their goal of preserving agrarian life in the South. The intellectual debate which they stirred

up served to draw the lines in the conflict between agricultural tradition and industrial progress. But in the end their project was reduced to the stature of an academic exercise, and the practical usefulness of their venture became ephemeral.

The situation of American agriculture just after the 1930 publication of I'll Take My Stand ironically began to improve, at least comparatively speaking. The collapse of industrial economy and the onset of the Depression wreaked havoc in the cities, but on the farms, remnants of self-sufficiency insulated country people from extreme deprivation. Many city dwellers went to live with their farm relatives until times improved. On the farm, at least, they could eat and wait for the industrial machine to be repaired. Economic malaise hit the rural areas, too. Banks foreclosed on mortgaged farms, leaving families penniless and landless. Big-time speculators with giant machines forced thousands of farmers to abandon their homes. John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath poignantly depicted the migration of up-rooted Oklahoma farmers to California, where their dreams of establishing a new life in accordance with agrarian ideals were brutally crushed. Although no farmer himself, Steinbeck understood the problems of farmers in the 30s and sympathized with them.

James Hearst was farming in Iowa back in the '20s and '30s and also writing poems and stories related to his occupation. In an article from a special issue of the North American Review which saluted his work over the past 50 years, Hearst

reminisced about what it was like for the farmer in those days.

Boy, it was rough during the '20s. The stock market and everything else in the country seemed to be going up, but our prices were going down. We couldn't get those two ends to meet no matter what we did. Old Calvin Coolidge paid no attention to the farmer's distress. My father ... went to see Herbert Hoover before he was president, and Hoover said, "I pulled myself up by my bootstraps; let the farmer do the same thing." ... That was a bad time ... when farmers were dumping milk and destroying butter and killing hogs and doing anything they could think of to try to get prices up a little. ... You could smell poverty.⁹

As time wore on, things gradually got better, but the memory of the Depression years remained a permanent fixture in the minds of people who lived then. A kind of mental toughness resulted from the experience, a knowledge that the farmer could weather any sort of storm. James Hearst reflects the durability of the midwestern farmer in his poems. Kenneth Lash says about him, "Jim Hearst is no Robert Frost, farming a farm for poems. He farmed for crops and to stay alive, and has that kind of relationship with nature."¹⁰ The pragmatic attitude of the farmer towards the problems and questions of life has always been one of his mainstays, as Hearst shows in this poem called "Truth":

How the devil do I know
if there are rocks in your field,
plow it and find out.
If the plow strikes something
harder than earth, the point
shatters at a sudden blow
and the tractor jerks sidewise
and dumps you off the seat -
because the spring hitch
isn't set to trip quickly enough
and it never is - probably
you hit a rock. That means
the glacier emptied his pocket
in your field as well as mine,

but the connection with a thing
is the only truth I know of,
so plow it.¹¹

Hearst's poems display a sagacity earned through years of laboring on the farm and closely interacting with nature. He is not prone to idealization; the hard realities of life have taught him better. Confined to a wheelchair since early manhood from a crippling swimming accident, he nonetheless has remained optimistic. His handicap has not prevented him from living life to the fullest; in addition to farming and writing, he has taught English courses at several universities. His outlook towards life is as straightforward as the long Iowa corn rows, as shown in the poem "Stolid Farmer To His Son":

Choose your wife for straight legs and an honest tongue.
Take no more to market that you have to sell.
Be cautious with strangers and cover the top of your well
And teach your children virtue while they are young.
And when you are old be glad if you've learned to keep
Your wife's affections and memories of neighbors and friends
And had sense to know that your comfort depends
On the money you saved and the grief you have put to sleep.¹²

The poetry of James Hearst is regional in its character, but it expresses the compassion, humor, perseverance, and plain common-sense of the farmer in ways that make it representative of agrarian communities across America. Although the tremors of industrial society have often shaken the foundations of rural life, it is tough spikes like Hearst who have held it together.

American agriculture in the 1940s may have been back on its feet, but it still faced an up-hill climb towards sta-

bility and proficiency. The agricultural status quo that emerged from the Depression was radically different from the sort of agrarian culture which Jefferson had envisioned. Increasingly larger farms, fewer actual farm laborers, crop specialization, mechanization, use of chemicals, and close links with urban-industrial society were the major characteristics of the new agriculture. The "culture" element of agriculture was being deleted; agri-business became the definitive term.

Some farm critics were insisting, however, that the status quo was wrong in its approach to farming. These men, whether scientists, agriculturalists, or interested laymen, believed that modern farming practices and trends were lowering the quality of the food produced, endangering the environment, reducing the fertility of the soil, and unwisely uprooting thousands of small-scale landholders. The farm critics expressed their ideas and proposed their remedies in various books and publications which, although not literary in intent, did influence the development of American agrarianism. The proposals they advocated were based on practical considerations, but the values behind their proposals often paralleled traditional agrarian ideals.

One of the most prominent of the farm critics was Sir Albert Howard, an English agricultural scientist who worked for years in India trying to apply the processes of nature to farming techniques. His book An Agricultural Testament rejected the conventional farming practices of Western agri-

business in favor of the ancient methods of Oriental agriculture, which he believed were nearer to nature's ways. He advocated small, intensively cultivated land-holdings where the balance of nature could be closely regulated and the fertility of the earth thus maintained. He developed the Indore method of composting organic materials to produce a rich, natural fertilizer. Howard foresaw the environmental problems of agriculture in our own time, for he believed that farming which contradicts nature is inevitably destructive to itself, to the earth, and to society. He wrote: "These mushroom ideas of agriculture are failing; mother earth deprived of her manurial rights is in revolt; the land is going on strike; the fertility of the soil is declining."¹³ Howard's book is useful for organic gardeners and farmers today; in his own time, it served to turn agrarian thought towards ideal principles which were lacking in conventional farming practices.

J.I. Rodale was a jack-of-all-trades who made his mark on the farm scene in the 1940s. Rodale was a dramatist, but he is better known for his controversial theories concerning medicine and farming. He enthusiastically stated that natural foods produced by organic gardening techniques were the elixir which could improve health and prolong life. Accepting the principles of Sir Albert Howard, he stressed the importance of soil fertility, writing: "not only does physical health come from our food through the fertility of the soil in which it grows, but also our minds and characters are nourished and

nurtured through that very soil."¹⁴ Rodale founded the magazine Organic Gardening and Farming, which today is a leading example of back-to-the-land popular literature. In The Last Whole Earth Catalog, Gurney Norman says: "It has occurred to me that if I were a dictator determined to control the national press, Organic Gardening would be the first publication I'd squash, because it is the most subversive. The whole organic movement is exquisitely subversive."¹⁵ What is being subverted is industrial society, including agri-business, which through its wastefulness, negligence, and destructiveness is subverting the earth and its creatures. J.I. Rodale helped to popularize and organize the back-to-the-land movement ... naturally.

The writings of Sir Albert Howard and J.I. Rodale were not literary, but they did influence a man of literature - Louis Bromfield. In Bromfield, one can see the merger of those interested in the practical side of agriculture and those interested in the agrarian life as a literary subject. In the 1920s, Bromfield was a well-respected author; he won the Pulitzer Prize in 1926. His literary reputation declined in the '30s, partly because his growing interest in farming diverted his attention away from writing good fiction. Bromfield lived in France until the outbreak of World War II, at which time he returned to his home state of Ohio and bought three run-down farms near Mansfield. Malabar Farm, as his place came to be called, was the realization of Bromfield's dream of restoring mis-used farmland, of living a productive,

contented life with nature. As David Anderson says in his Bromfield biography, "In effect his goal was the re-creation of a way of life that had vanished in America as soil washed down to the sea and as abstract forces of economics gained their ascendancy during the years of exploitation that had begun in the Civil War era and turned America away from the Jeffersonian dream of an agricultural democracy."¹⁶ As it was for his organic predecessors, the health of the soil was a primary value in Bromfield's epistemology. In Pleasant Valley, his equivalent of Walden, Bromfield related the means by which the soil on his farm was rebuilt. "As the new pioneers bent upon restoring the land, we had to put back by every manner of ingenious means the very elements the first pioneers had removed recklessly or permitted to disappear through erosion and neglect."¹⁷ His "ingenious means" involved using the processes of nature to build the quality of the soil on his land. He utilized animal manures, green manures, limestone, and some chemical fertilizers to enrich the soil and at the same time allow him to earn a profit. He prided himself on the teeming life found in the earth on his farms - earthworms, bacteria, fungus, and other life, demonstrating that soil is alive and not an inanimate mass of minerals. For Bromfield, the soil was more than dirt; it was a symbol of man's condition, a living barometer which measured the possibilities for growth, abundance, and satisfaction.

Bromfield devoted himself towards fulfilling other agrarian ideals, too. The Depression taught him that self-

sufficiency could insure security and freedom in times of social, political, or economic upheaval. He often stated that the French were able to survive invasions and other crises virtually unscathed because they cultivated large gardens which fed them in times of want. At Malabar, Bromfield wanted to be as diversified as possible; he grew fruit and vegetables, raised livestock, built fish ponds, encouraged wild game, kept bees, made maple sugar - all in addition to growing crops and raising cattle. He was determined to make his farm a fortress against outside influences.

Innovation was a key element of Bromfield's farming practices. He made use of modern scientific knowledge and was willing to experiment with new techniques. He was one of the first farmers to try the no-till method of cultivation. But allied with his agricultural know-how was a mystical, romantic relationship with the earth. He thought that a good farmer must be a little "teched," meaning "he loves his land, his animals and his trees and understands them all. He farms not in order to make money but because of the pleasure and the satisfaction there is in it, because it is a destiny he would not change for any other in the world."¹⁸

Like other agrarian writers, Bromfield condemned industrial society, sometimes leaning towards apocalyptic prophesying. "When factories are silent or in ruins and the industrial population is without food and perhaps shelter, the forest, the hills, the valleys, will still be there...."¹⁹ In contrast, farm life was seen to embody peace, security,

and happiness. These values, however, could only be attained by working with nature. Bromfield said that the tradition of farming in America "was simply that of mining the land."²⁰ The thrust of his book and of his life was to show that wise farming, taking into account the requirements of nature, could provide a good life for farmers and their families and simultaneously begin to restore the land.

In a later book entitled Malabar Farm, Bromfield drifted away from his earlier support of organic farming practices and self-sufficiency. Perhaps the demands of his large farm (Malabar contained over 1000 acres) prevented him from economically practicing his ideals. At any rate, Bromfield's major contribution to agrarianism was his avowal that land desecrated by years of abuse could be restored so that it could once again comfortably support farm families. His emphasis on the health of the soil held literal and symbolic meanings - nature will work with man to regain fertility, and Jeffersonian ideals can still be viable seed for planting in the soil of 20th century society.

The development of the back-to-the-land philosophy from the time of James Miller's ten acre farm to Louis Bromfield's huge Malabar Farm of the '40s was an often painful process, running the gauntlet of disillusionment, economic woes, social unrest, and industrial dominance. The blows which these counter-productive factors dealt to farmers attempting to realize the ideals of Jefferson were sometimes fatal, sometimes crippling, and almost always forceful enough to leave a permanent

mark. Romantic enthusiasm towards nature became tempered by the realization that man's irresponsibility had lessened the possibilities for agrarian fulfillment. The yeoman's independence decreased when governmental intervention was needed to curb agricultural deterioration. Farmers learned that industry, and not agriculture, was the major part of the American economy, and they suffered along with the rest when the Depression hit. The virtuous husbandman found that one of his virtues - patience - was being overworked as he waited for times to improve. Yet despite the jolts and bruises sustained, the agricultural community managed to stay on its feet and Jefferson's ideals, if somewhat battered, were still capable of inspiring people to continue, or to begin, living the agrarian life.

Today's back-to-the-land people, most of whom were born after World War II, retain the lessons which earlier rural people learned. They know, or soon find out, that if the ideal life on the farm is to be approached, it must be through realistic, practical, common-sense means. To establish a self-sufficient homestead nowadays, one must deal with the legacy of mis-used land, governmental red-tape, ties to urban-industrial society, and many other problems. The way is hard, but knowing that farmers in the past have run the gauntlet and come out on the other side is reassuring.

Life down on the farm was never quite the same after World War II. The late 1940s saw the intensification of a pattern of growth which has continued up into the present - the growth of metropolitan areas, the growth of industry, the growth of big government, the growth of the Gross National Product. American agriculture grew quantitatively - chemical fertilizers and pesticides were applied in abundance, crop yields increased, bigger, more sophisticated machines were used -, but it is arguable whether the quality of rural life improved or not. Farmers, more and more of whom left the country for the cities, were not as bad off as they had been during the Depression, but neither were they near to assuming the dominant cultural role which Jefferson had hoped for them. Louis Bromfield had sought at Malabar Farm to reassert Jeffersonian agrarian ideals and to prod his countrymen towards a rural renaissance. He was able to shake the pessimistic dust of the doldrums off of some farmers, but he never succeeded in overcoming the pressures of industrial economics which forced so many farmers towards specialization and financial "efficiency." After Bromfield's death in 1956, Malabar became a center for ecological study, protected from outside encroachment. Many other farms did not fare so well. Farmland surrounding cities and towns was swallowed up by suburban housing complexes and shopping centers. Fields where livestock once grazed became blacktopped parking lots. The urban-industrial Machine rumbled across the landscape, bulldozing under agrarian values.

The urban-industrial blitzkrieg, however, was met with stiff opposition. The widespread social protest of the 1960s was generated by the common conviction that the exploitation and destruction of people and of the earth must be stopped. On the forefront of the protest lines was Wendell Berry. From his farm in Kentucky, from his university classroom, from the pages of his books, Berry's clarifying voice rose above the din of the 60s and faced head-on the task of understanding and living in the modern world. Today he continues to express his ideas about life, invoking values which many contemporary writers either ignore or deny. Berry is determined to do something about the state of society; like Thoreau, he has decided to let his life be the counter-friction to stop the Machine. Perhaps his friend Ken Kesey characterizes him best: "Wendell Berry is the Sergeant York charging unnatural odds across our no-man's-land of ecology. Conveying the same limber innocence of young Gary Cooper, Wendell advances on the current crop of Krauts armed with naught but his pen and his mythic ridgerunner righteousness. One after another he picks them off, from the flying bridges of their pleasure boats as they roar through his native Kentucky rivers, from beneath the hard hats in Hazard County strip mines, from the swivel chairs in the Pentagon where they weigh the various ways to wage war on all forms of enemy life beyond the end of their own friendly chin. He's a crackshot essayist, and, for those given to capture, a genial and captivating poet. He boasts a formidable arsenal

of novels, speeches, articles, stories, and poems from his outpost in one of the world's most ravaged battlefields where he writes the good fight and tends his family and honeybees. Consider him an ally."¹ This humorous, insightful description of Berry comes from The Last Whole Earth Catalog, one of the classics in back-to-the-land literature. Berry himself wrote several reviews and an essay which appeared in the Catalog.

Berry's literary work is a contemporary example of American agrarianism; agriculture is the main concern of his writing and of his life. After graduating from college and living for several years in New York, California, and Europe, he and his family returned to his home community, settling on a small farm near Port Royal. He now writes, teaches at the University of Kentucky, and farms organically. Kesey says that Berry is an "ally" of the back-to-the-land movement; I would go beyond that and say that he is a major spokesman for the movement, probably the spokesman in literature. The subtitle of the Catalog is "access to tools," and I think this describes Berry's relationship to the movement very well. The thoughts in his books are like hand-made tools - an axe, a hammer, a hoe - constructed out of the toughest materials of agrarian tradition, tempered by sustained, demanding use, and capable of helping a person going back to the land to build or rebuild his place in the country.

Berry inherited the tools he wields from those writers in the past whose works combine to comprise the agrarian

heritage. Reading his novels, poems, and essays, one constantly comes in contact with ideas and themes which have been integral to the works of Jefferson, Thoreau, the Twelve Southerners, Howard, Bromfield and other agrarian writers. Berry has assimilated agrarianism into his literature, resulting in an historical depth of field. In a poem called "At a Country Funeral," he explains why he values the past:

But our memory of ourselves, hard earned,
is one of the land's seeds, as a seed
is the memory of the life of its kind in its place,
to pass on into life the knowledge
of what has died. What we owe the future
is not a new start, for we can only begin
with what has happened. We owe the future
the past, the long knowledge
that is the potency of time to come.²

Like any good homesteader, Berry familiarizes himself with what has gone before, uses it wisely, and passes it on if it still proves viable. But he is equally prepared to try new ideas and tactics, based on lessons from the past, but adjusted to the present and geared towards the future. By looking at his writings and their relationship to traditional agrarian themes, one can see what Berry retains from the past, what he changes, and, finally, what he offers as an alternative to the American Machine.

Agrarians in this country have always held strong opinions about urban-industrial society. Jefferson wanted to encourage an agrarian culture in America because he saw the the negative aspects of Europe's industrial culture. Thoreau criticized mechanization, which he believed hindered individuals from living in coherence with nature. His attitude

was fatalistic; he thought that industrialism was an Atropos which would inevitably cut off the thread of pastoral life. The Southern Agrarians vehemently derided northern urban-industrial society; they mentioned factors of alienation, dehumanization, boredom, and destructiveness which have become watchwords when speaking about cities and industry today. Louis Bromfield also condemned modern trends which had uprooted the farm life he cherished. Most agrarians, in fact, have dealt with the dichotomy between urban-industrial and rural-agrarian values, coming to the realization that they are incompatible in their present forms. Unfortunately for those who value agrarian life, the opponent has ascended to a dominant position in America. As Leo Marx says, we live in an "organized, urban, industrial, nuclear-armed society."³

Wendell Berry, living in a time of urban decay, industrial pollution, spiraling crime rates, and nervous unrest, has ample reasons to agree with his predecessors that urban-industrial society can destroy the possibilities of living contentedly in the world. Throughout his writings, one comes across images of urban-industrial chaos and destruction intruding on the lives of people and on the sacred grounds of the earth. In Berry's long novel A Place On Earth, he writes of a small farm community in Kentucky during the last year of World War II. The book centers on May Feltner, a farmer, and his family and neighbors as they try to go on with the life they know in spite of the disrupting influence of the war. Early in the book, we see an image of a frightening juxtapo-

sition of rural peacefulness and military machinery. Mat and his grandson are walking through the village, heading home for supper, happy to be together.

Neither of them hears the plane approaching. It has come in low over the town, and appears suddenly; the four engines and wings and grey fuselage take shape abruptly among the tops of the trees. ... As it comes nearer they can see the blur of the propellers, the black gun-barrels spiking out of the glass blisters, the rivet-heads along the fuselage and wings.

It passes above their heads, shaking the ground.⁴

The sudden, startling appearance of the dark bomber gives one the feeling that the war is attacking life in America as well as the enemy. Mat, whose son Virgil is missing in action and presumed dead, struggles throughout the novel to come to grips with the painful changes which the war has caused in his life. He realizes that the massive destruction of lives and of the earth, even though it occurs far away from his community, is a threat to the way of living he knows and cares about. He feels intimations of an approaching era which could easily whirl away everything he values.

Towards the end of the book, Mat is mowing in a pasture, steering his team of mules and watching the tall grass fall. But at work his mind is troubled by the news that an atomic bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima the day before. Mat "felt his mind borne, like a man in a little boat, on the crest of history, in a violence of pure effect It has seemed to him that the years of violence have at last arrived at what ... they had been headed for, not by any human reason or motive or wish but by the logic of violence itself."⁵ He cannot

comprehend the total meaning of nuclear devastation, but he knows that it forecasts a dark storm which will not be easily dissipated.

The meaning of Hiroshima has become more evident in our own time. It symbolizes the powerful technological dominance which has relentlessly pushed its way into society and is now capable of destroying the world. For Wendell Berry, the meaning has practical significance: the world is now our dependent, and we have an obligation to protect and preserve it for ourselves and for the people of the future. His criticisms of urban-industrial society point directly to its tendency to abuse the earth. In his first book of essays, The Long-Legged House, Berry lambastes the destructive, violent, greedy, exploitive mentalities of the strip mining industry, of the war-waging government, of the insensitive public which consumes nature instead of using it properly. Berry expands on his theme of urban-industrial opposition to the earth in his poetry. In "A Letter" from Farming: A Handbook, he exclaims:

The cities have forgot the earth,
and they will rot at heart
till they remember it again.⁶

Berry is explicit in his criticism of urban-industrial society, magnifying and updating the comments of earlier agrarians. But being a realistic man, he does not pretend that only industry or only the government or only the cities are to blame for abusing the earth. The problem lies deeper, in the people who accept expediency over morality. In "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer's Liberation Front," he comes down on such people:

Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
 vacation with pay. Want more
 of everything ready made. Be afraid
 to know your neighbors and to die.
 And you will have a window in your head.
 Not even your future will be a mystery
 any more. Your mind will be punched in a
 card
 and shut away in a little drawer.
 When they want you to buy something
 they will call you. When they want you
 to die for profit they will let you know.⁷

Berry believes that many of our environmental problems are caused by people who unconsciously waste and destroy the resources of the world. In "Think Little," an ecological essay, he states: "Nearly every one of us, nearly every day of his life, is contributing directly to the ruin of this planet."⁸ He goes beyond the accusations of other agrarian writers to admit the complicity of all people in the conspiracy against the earth.

In his work, both on his farm and in his literature and teaching, he has sought ways of living in the world without being destructive. Along with his condemnations of urban-industrial society, there is an implicit suggestion that healthy cities and industries are possible. Gardens can be planted, pollution can be controlled, resources can be recycled, communities can be revived, industry can be regulated. These changes would require moral discipline and respect for nature, qualities which come not from governmental edicts, but from personal efforts of responsibility. Berry widens the scope of the agrarian tradition in order to admit the possibilities of an improved urban-industrial society.

The first priority in upgarding urban-industrial society is, according to Berry, to trim and revamp its wasteful, extravagant, exploitive economy. Jefferson foresaw today's economic situation when he said that dependence upon others for the basic necessities of life causes insecurity and a diminishment of freedom. Thoreau saw that preoccupation with material things reduces the likelihood that spiritual needs will be attended to; he criticized society's economy for its material superfluity. During periods of hardship for farmers, of course, the economy was extensively attacked by agrarian writers. The Southern Agrarians were critical of the economy because it forced farmers out of the country and into the cities, where they became consumers instead of producers. Berry picks up the ideas of these agrarian writers and incorporates them directly into his own criticisms of urban-industrial economics. In "Discipline and Hope," a long essay on the various problems that confront American society, he quotes from I'll Take My Stand, then applies those ideas to what he sees in the world today. He says: "We have made our false economy a false god, and it has made blasphemy of the truth. ... Its principle is to waste and destroy the living substance of the world and the birthright of posterity for a monetary profit that is the most flimsy and useless of human artifacts."⁹ Berry attributes the wastefulness and destructiveness of the economy to greed and ecological ignorance; he cites in "Think Little" the example of a paper company representative referring to conservation as a "no-return investment."¹⁰ But

again, he does not solely criticize institutions. Consumers who depend on others to produce their electricity, grow their food, and supply their luxuries are guilty of conniving with destructive strip miners and exploitive farmers and wasteful factory owners. Furthermore, consumers have no real idea of what is involved in producing a commodity; their ties with the earth are severed by the ubiquitous "middle-man." Lacking understanding, people arrogantly use up the natural resources of the earth - the land, the oceans, the living creatures - without returning anything of lasting value to the world.

The writers mentioned before who criticized urban-industrial economics all had an alternative in mind. Jefferson believed that agriculture should be a fundamental, dominant part of America's economy. Thoreau thought that a life of simplicity, based on the necessities, was the best alternative to extravagance. The Southern Agrarians hoped to maintain an agrarian economy in the South. Wendell Berry also opts for an agrarian economy based on simplicity. He says: "If one deplores the destructiveness and wastefulness of the economy, then one is under an obligation to live as far out on the margin of the economy as one is able: to be economically independent of exploitive industries, to learn to need less, to waste less, to make things last, to give up meaningless luxuries, to understand and resist the language of salesmen and public relations experts, to see through attractive packages, to refuse to purchase fashion or glamour or

prestige."¹¹ Berry believes that a return to the rural areas of the country would allow these economic ideals to be more practicable. By going back to the land, people could begin to "Think Little," to live humbly and reverently with the earth. In one of his poems, Berry expresses his "good dream":

I think of a luxury
in the sturdiness and grace
of necessary things, not
in frivolity. That would heal
the earth and heal men.¹²

He does not rule out altogether industrial manufacturing in favor of hand-made products. But he does insist that quality should take precedence over quantity. He states: "Such an economy would, for example, produce an automobile that would last at least as long, and be at least as easy to maintain, as a horse."¹³ He realizes that General Motors is not likely to begin making such cars soon, but the good thing about the economy he envisions is that it does not have to wait on institutions in order to start taking effect. Individuals can act to simplify their lives, to go to the country if they can, to respect the earth and use its resources wisely. Berry has done this in his own life, showing that the economic ideals of Jefferson and Thoreau can be followed in the modern world.

To live on a small farm and be self-sufficient - that ideal has been an integral part of American agrarianism. Jefferson visualized an agrarian culture composed of small, independent farmers, each producing their own food and other necessities. In a poem called "The Mad Farmer Manifesto: The First Amendment," Berry pays homage to Jefferson's vision:

That is the glimmering vein
 of our sanity, dividing
 from us from the start: land
 under us to steady us when we stood,
 free men in the great communion
 of the free. The vision keeps
 lighting in my mind, a window
 on the horizon in the dark.¹⁴

The "glimmering vein" of Jefferson's vision has threaded through the lives and writings of other agrarians : Thoreau practiced his ~~practiced his~~ Spartan self-sufficiency at Walden Pond, James Miller found Ten Acres Enough to support him and his family, Sir Albert Howard related how the Chinese tended small, self-contained plots, and Bromfield tried to be self-sufficient at Malabar (and failed, partly because he owned too much land to economically justify diversity). Crystalizing the ideal vision into reality, Berry lives on a small farm and attempts to practice self-sufficiency. He says: "My own plans have come to involve an idea of subsistence agriculture - which does not mean I advocate the privation and extreme hardship usually associated with such an idea. It means, simply, that along with my other occupations I intend to raise on my own land enough food for my family. Within the obvious limitations, I want my home to be a self-sufficient place."¹⁵ Berry's wish to be self-sufficient may sound strange and eccentric to many people in the present, but only a few decades ago it was the normal thing to do on the farm. A Place On Earth presents a rural community where small farmers are in the majority and self-sufficiency (supplemented by the marketing of tobacco) is the rule. These

farmers are vitally concerned with their land and the crops and livestock it nourishes. Berry offers them as exemplary citizens; although saddled with the flaws which characterize the human condition, they care for the earth, and it in return provides them with a wholesome, satisfying life. Although the manner of living seen in the novel has become largely a thing of the past, Berry holds on to the old-fashioned agrarian values which he believes can still lend meaning to life. His small homestead in Kentucky, aspiring towards self-sufficiency, is living proof that Jefferson's vision has not faded out completely.

The value of small landholders to a society goes beyond their economic significance. As Jefferson understood, a community of small farms and rural villages has an important cultural significance. He believed that an agrarian culture, linked intimately to the land, is much more likely to insure security, independence, and virtue for people than is an industrial culture. Whitman, too, envisioned an agrarian culture of free, able-bodied men and women. In his day, rural communities were widespread in America. But the forceful trends of urbanization and industrialization in the 20th century have led to their demise. Troy Cauley, an agrarian critic, thought that a sense of community was lacking in most of America by 1935. Literature, he thought, reflected that scarcity: "A novel setting forth the life story of an American who was born, lived, and died in the same community would be a rarity indeed."¹⁶

Wendell Berry's novel A Place On Earth would, I believe, fit Cauley's criteria. The community of Port William, Kentucky depicted in the novel is of the type which Jefferson and Whitman valued, composed of small-scale farmers and shopkeepers and craftsman. Berry, writing in an age when such communities have almost disappeared, posits the idea that the small rural community offers the chance for a meaningful existence to those living in its villages and on its farms. One of the reasons he gives for the desirability of rural communities is the continuity which defines people's relationship to one another and to the land. Farms often, by tradition, remain in one family for many years; in the novel, the land Mat Feltner farms has been in his family since it was settled. He had hopes of passing it on to his son, Virgil. But Virgil's death in the war had destroyed that dream, and consequently had broken the continuity which is a sustaining element of Mat's outlook towards the world. Probably the major concern of the novel is Mat's struggle to regain meaning in his life in the face of his son's death. Mat finally comes to realize that, although humans live and die, it is the land, the focal point of their attention and care, which ultimately lends continuity to their lives. Sitting at home one night, Mat and his Uncle Jack talk about their feelings towards the land: "The old man spoke of the names and landmarks and happenings of a time before Mat's birth, and Mat listened, his mind drawn back ... by the sense of the quiet continuance of the land, the place, through

all that has happened on it and to it.... For as always it was finally the land that they spoke of, fascinated as they've been all their lives by what has happened to it, their own ties to it, the wife of their race, more lovely and bountiful and kind than they have usually deserved, more severe and demanding than they have often been able to bear."¹⁷

In addition to continuity, another important aspect of rural communities which Berry identifies is the sense of discipline necessary for any responsible interaction between people of a common place. He observes that people living in a small village or in the country usually know their neighbors and are willing to help them if needed. They have established their homes with the intent of staying permanently, and they therefore take an active interest in the life of their community. Berry sees community as an ecological discipline; it asks: "What is the effect, on our neighbors and on our place in the world, of what we do?"¹⁸ Posing this question, one must proceed to impose the necessary limitations on one's life. Berry does not view these limitations as a bondage, but rather as a way of entering the mainstream of the world without fouling its waters. Community disciplines and continuity are complementary aspects of the kind of ideal rural community which Berry presents in A Place On Earth and which he is looking for in his own life.

Ken Kesey recounts the time when he visited Wendell Berry on his farm after a hard frost. Concerned about his crop of sorghum, Berry and Kesey hitched up a team of mules

and took a sample of the grain over to a couple of old farmers who lived up over the ridge. They examined the frosted sorghum and gave their advice. Kesey writes: "Listening to those two old American alchemists, one can better understand why Wendell Berry, who ... is now a full professor at the University of Kentucky, busts his butt the rest of the time farming with antique methods the land of his forefathers; there is a wisdom in our past that cannot be approached but with the past's appurtenances. Old Doors that no new key will open but that stand already ajar for those who approach by the Old Path."¹⁹ Berry's personal discipline is to live in such a way that he is attuned to the "continuous harmony" which flows out of the past, to the values of agrarian culture which, if not tightly grasped, will steadily slip away.

Concern with community has been a vital concern of American agrarianism, but a concern that goes directly to the marrow of our democratic ideals is the concern with individualism. Jefferson implanted the seed of individualism into the agrarian consciousness by opposing big government (that government is best that governs least) and championing the individualistic yeoman. Thoreau took Jefferson's ideas one step further; he rebelled against government (that government is best that governs not at all) and society, refusing to conform to principles which he believed were wrong. Latter-day agrarian James Hearst has seen that the individualistic farmer is still around these days. Indeed, such cantankerous farmers are found in the writings of Wendell Berry, who has

himself been known to tilt at windmills. Old Jack in A Place On Earth is as stubborn, independent, and individualistic as the orneriest mule in the Port William neighborhood. The Mad Farmer is Berry's persona in several of his poems, a codgy fellow who spits out his thoughts in any direction he pleases, as in "The Contrariness of the Mad Farmer":

I am done with apologies. If contrariness is my inheritance and destiny, so be it. If it is my mission to go in at exits and come out at entrances, so be it. I have planted by the stars in defiance of the experts, and tilled somewhat by incantation and by singing, and reaped, as I knew, by luck and Heaven's favor, in spite of the best advice.

...

Going against men, I have heard at times a deep harmony thrumming in the mixture, and when they ask me what I say I don't know. It is not the only or the easiest way to come to the truth. It is one way.²⁰

Old Jack and the Mad Farmer and Berry himself prize their freedom, but they are also very conscientious, acknowledging that freedom is contingent upon responsibility and the disciplines which guide responsible action in the world. It is not enough, Berry says, to merely oppose wrongness, whether it be in autocratic government or destructive industry or dehumanizing cities. One must, as an individual, take the initiative towards changing one's life so as not to paradoxically support the thing opposed. Berry, taking off on Jefferson and Thoreau's attitudes toward government, says: "It is certain, I think, that the best government is the one that governs least. But there is a much-neglected corollary: the best citizen is the one who least needs governing."²¹ The responsible citizen is guided in his actions by private

morality - conscience. Berry is definitely a moralist; he believes that moral action involves cherishing and maintaining the vigor of the earth. Responsibly bending to the task of caring for the earth, one can be lightened and uplifted by the harvest which the earth returns. Freedom takes flight, but only with the knowledge that responsibility will bring it back down to the ground again. As a farmer, Berry knows the cyclic nature of freedom and responsibility, and his understanding of individualism takes this knowledge into account.

Throughout American agrarianism, weaving in and out of ideas about economy and culture and virtues, there is a practical consideration with agriculture, with the ways and means of farming the land. For some agrarians, this was only incidentally important; Thoreau wanted to "know" his beans, but not in the sense that he wanted to know how best to plant and fertilize and cultivate and harvest them. Wendell Berry, however, needs to be aware of those kinds of things if he is to be a good farmer. Unlike the idealists who flubbed their utopian experiments in the 19th century, Berry is knowledgeable about the realities of farming. His agricultural concepts are guided by the ideal, but based on the real.

Attitudes towards ownership of land underlie how the farmer treats his land. Jefferson said that the land is God's gift to man, to be used wisely and judiciously. He, of course, was in favor of universal land ownership. Thoreau thought the land was to be enjoyed, but not owned. Berry

synthesizes these two seemingly divergent beliefs; he says that people are justified in owning some land (after all, few people nowadays can squat as Thoreau did). But owners should realize that they belong to the land, and not vice versa. Land, like other resources, should be used carefully, preserved, and finally relinquished to the future in as good or better condition as it was originally.

Too many farmers in the past and present have not respected the land in the way Berry thinks appropriate. They have taken their deed of ownership as a license to use up and exploit the land. Thoreau was critical of this type of greedy farmer, as were Howard, Rodale, and Bromfield. Traditional farming practices of the past often resulted in the depletion of soil fertility; the frontier mentality led many settlers to besmirch the land, then move on to greener pastures. Berry writes in A Place On Earth: "They came into the country, those first ones, like hogs into a corn crib, trampling and befouling what they couldn't eat in a day...."²² Such irresponsibility has diminished the possibilities for plenty in the present. Berry speaks to this dilemma in his poem "The Wages of History":

Man's negligence and their
 fatuous ignorance and abuse
 have made a hardship of this earth.
 Living on these plundered
 hillsides of Kentucky is harder
 for crops and men too
 than on the terraced slopes
 of Tuscany or Japan, where care
 has had a history centuries
 old.²³

Berry is even more critical of modern technological farming and the agricultural establishment which supports it. As an organic farmer, he thinks that trying to replace soil humus with chemical fertilizers is an unnatural, destructive practice. Similarly, he attacks one-crop farming tendencies, saying that the diversified farms of the Orient are a better model to follow. One could go right down the list - high-powered machinery, chemical pesticides, emphasis on quantity rather than quality - all of these characteristics of technological agriculture and agri-business are in some way or another counter to the ideals that Berry upholds.

In order to change from the wasteful and exploitive habits which have been a part of American agriculture since the beginning of the white man's domain, Berry believes that we need to emulate the methods of land use of indigenous people in other parts of the world and in the past. He says: "I have come more and more strongly to believe that the ultimate moral goal, even the moral necessity, of the American people must be to become the aborigines of the American land."²⁴ This quote comes from a review he wrote for The Last Whole Earth Catalog on F.H. King's Farmers of Forty Centuries, a book about peasant farming in the Orient. In the review, Berry stresses that indigenous people like the American Indians or the peasants of the Orient have lived on the earth wisely and reverently without destroying its fertility. Thoreau in Walden likewise states his respect for the Indian and ancient peasants who, through rituals and traditional

rites, lived closely to nature and avoided the pitfalls of materialism. Berry continues: "The agricultural practices of primitives and peasants ought to be particularly instructive to us, for these people have farmed the land with a sense of profound unity with it; thier ways, formed slowly over generations out of an intricate knowledge of the land and its needs, have tended to preserve it."²⁵ The farmers of our country should study and take to heart the practices and outlook of "aborigines" - indigenous people - in their relationship to the earth. Berry may be pessimistic about the likelihood of this occurring, but, for himself, he states:

I will purge my mind of the airy claims
of church and state, and observe the ancient wisdom
of tribesman and peasant, who understood
they labored on the earth only to lie down in it
in peace, and were content.²⁶

The techniques used by Oriental peasants were organic farming techniques, that is to say, organic materials (manure, garbage, vegetation, etc...) were worked into the soil where, through the processes of bacterial action and decay, they would release their nutrients and enrich the earth. Wendell Berry is a practicing organic farmer, believing that this is the only sensible alternative to specialized, chemicalized farming. He has written several articles for the magazine Organic Gardening and Farming, among them pieces on how to build a compost privy and farming with draft horses. Like his organic mentor, Sir Albert Howard, Berry believes that "good agricultural practice is based upon the observation and the use of natural processes."²⁷ Like Louis Bromfield,

Berry places great importance on the living quality of the soil. He states frequently in his writings that the organic farming practices of Oriental agriculture have maintained the fertility of their soil for thousands of years, whereas the extractive agricultural practices of American farmers have seriously reduced the fertility of our farmlands in only a few hundred years. Furthermore, our reliance on chemical fertilizers has led to environmental problems; we flush our garbage and human wastes into rivers or burn them or bury them at desolate land fills, polluting the water and air and wasting organic materials which should be returned to the farmlands. These practices are destructive of the earth and, ultimately, of human society. But, as Berry says, "A person who is growing a garden, if he is growing it organically, is improving a piece of the world."²⁸ Instead of wasting organic material, he is returning it to his land. Instead of using potentially harmful chemical pesticides, he diversifies his plantings, he uses safe pest controls, he grows strong, resistant plants, he accepts some insect damage. Berry sees organic farming not as a mystical cult, but as a scientific, common-sense approach to the land. It originates not from the laboratory or textbooks or the demands of the economy, but from the earth.

The type of farming which Berry has in mind is not easy; it requires detailed, laborious attention to the needs of the earth in order to produce healthy, high quality crops. Hard work is not something which has been treasured by some agrarians

in the past. The Utopians said it hindered their intellectual pursuits, Thoreau said it had value, to a point, but he preferred leisurly contemplation, and the Realists derided it as "drudgery." Berry believes that the aversion to hard work has persisted into our own time; the laborsaving devices of technological agriculture are manifestations of the attempt to avoid "drudgery." But Berry avows that hard work is a constant, necessary discipline which people must assume in their own lives. To get one's hands dirty is not degrading if work is meaningful and responsible. In fact, wholesome work can be ennobling and a source of pleasure. The farmers depicted in A Place On Earth work long, hard, difficult hours tending their crops and animals. But they really enjoy their labors and are often uplifted by the simple joys which come to them through their tasks. During the lambing season, Mat Feltner goes for days on end without enough sleep, working steadily to care for his sheep:

In spite of the difficulty and weariness, he goes about his work with greater interest and excitement than at any other time of the year. This is what he was born to, and what he chose. And when he has made sure of the life of whatever is newborn - ... - he's more at peace with himself than he is at any other time. His labor has been his necessity and ^{his} profound desire.²⁹

In his own life, Wendell Berry has shown that intellectual activities and farming are compatible. Labor of the mind and labor of the body, in his case, both bend themselves to the continuously hard, yet joyful task of cultivating the earth.

As it should be quite clear by now, Wendell Berry is

deeply concerned with the life and health of the world. As an ecologist in the mold of Thoreau, he values nature and makes it his touchstone for all aspects of life. But Berry's relationship to the earth is that of a farmer; he is dependent on it and has a permanent relation to it. As Speer Morgan says, Berry's "style is that of a farmer who plants and tends straight rows, not a Romantic who wanders temporarily in the luxuriance of a wild or infinite nature."³⁰ In this respect, his attitude towards nature is more like Bromfield or Hearst; the farmer lives in a symbiotic relationship with nature. Involved in the day-by-day activities of agrarian life, the farmer gains an intimacy with the natural world, the plants and animals he cares for. This intimacy sometimes borders on spiritual identification, as in "The Prayers and Sayings of the Mad Farmer":

IX

Sowing the seed,
my hand is one with the earth.

Wanting the seed to grow,
my mind is one with the light.

Hoeing the crop,
my hands are one with the rain.

Having cared for the plants,
my mind is one with the air.

Hungry and trusting,
my mind is one with the earth.

Eating the fruit,
my body is one with the earth.³¹

The farmer who becomes one with his crops attains a spiritual awareness of the cycle of life revolving through his fields

and through his life.

Berry's close interaction with nature in the place he lives allows him to escape the mental despair and paralysis which have stricken so many people in modern life. Speaking of how urban-industrial society has disheartened men, Donald Davidson, one of the Southern Agrarians, says in his poem "Prologue: The Long Street":

The seasons, even the seasons wither
And all is mingled with a chaff of time
Till I must wonder, pacing the long street,
If anything in this vague inconcievable world
Can, lie still, be set apart, be named.³²

Glancing through Wendell Berry's books, one finds that he, at least, is able to name the elements of the world around him - the wildflowers, the trees, the birds and the wild animals in the nearby woods, the crops, the garden plants, the fruit trees, and the domesticated animals on his farm. He has entered into the country, made his home there, and studied the things around him. His real, practical relationship with nature prevents the urge towards meaninglessness which distanced abstraction often tends to cause.

The agrarian outlook which Berry turns towards the earth enables him to philosophically accept certain hard facts of life which many people cannot face squarely. One of these is the fact of death. Berry knows that man's relationship to the earth is conditioned by the reality of death. As an ecologist and as an organic farmer, Berry realizes that the cycle of life and death is a fundamental, necessary part of existence. Life leads to death and decay, which nourishes the earth and

leads to rebirth and renewal. Humans, however, have trouble dealing with this reality; we somehow want to believe that we will go on forever. Berry understands the human longing to be infinite; a major theme of A Place On Earth is that people have great difficulty in resigning themselves to the inevitability of death. Mat Feltner in the end comes to realize that all he has strived for in his life must finally be relinquished, in death, to nature and the world. The clearings of order he has opened in his life will be taken over by the wilderness. This is no cause for despair, though, for either Mat or for Berry himself (the two seem to be practically indistinguishable). Death is the end of consciousness, but only the beginning of a complete submergence into the earth, a oneness which is unattainable in life. In a personal essay called "A Native Hill," Berry expresses beautifully his emergent awareness of death and its meaning. Lying on the ground in the woods, a leaf flutters down from overhead and lands on his chest:

And suddenly I apprehend in it the dark proposal of the ground. Under the fallen leaf my breastbone burns with imminent decay. Other leaves fall. My body begins its long shudder into humus. I feel my substance escape me, carried into the mold by beetles and worms. Days, winds, seasons pass over me as I sink under the leaves. For a time only sight is left to me, a passive awareness of the sky overhead, birds crossing, the mazed interreaching of the treetops, the leaves falling - and then that, too, sinks away. It is acceptable to me, and I am at peace.

When I move to go, it is as though I rise up out of the world.³³

This final line suggests Berry's answer to how man should relate to the world: move through life responsibly and diligently

and lovingly with the full awareness of death and with a willingness to submit to the conditions of life on the earth.

What one serves may be beyond comprehension, a mystery shadowed in darkness, but the light of our days is enough to see that committing oneself to the earth will not be futile.

It is apparent to me that Wendell Barry loves the agrarian life which he has chosen. The feelings he has for life in the country are not new ones; agrarian writers have expressed them for many years. Idealization of agrarian life often results from such sentiments. Berry, too, can show a very favorable view of country life; reading his works, one sometimes wants to go down to Kentucky, be a farmer, and live the good life. But he does not downplay the difficulties and frustrations of his life, nor does he imply that the meanings and satisfactions he knows are easy to achieve. As Speer Morgan says, he earns his transcendence through devotion and dedication to his place in the world. "If there is epiphany there are also worms in the tomatoes."³⁴ Berry does not put forth life in the country as any kind of utopia; as he wryly states in one of his essays: "A picked cornfield under a few inches of water must be the duck Utopia - Utopia being, I assume, more often achieved by ducks than by men."³⁵ Berry believes that a place is what one makes it, that if one is willing to accept the proper disciplines and to live in a straightforward, practical manner, then one can make life meaningful and fulfilling. One should be able to say, as Mat Feltner says: "I've lived my life the way a hungry man eats."³⁶

"Possibility" is a word that Wendell Berry is fond of using. The agrarian ideas which he writes about - his critical views towards urban-industrial society and its economy, his alternative affirmation of the values of an agrarian economy based on small self-sufficient farms, his vision of an agrarian culture, his insistence on individual responsibility, his concepts of farming based on nature's ways, his cherishing of the earth, his realistic attitude towards agrarian life - are all fraught with the underlying belief that people can change their lives and change the world for the better. His ideas are founded both on the literary tradition of agrarianism in America and on his own perceptions of life in the world today. Berry's thoughts are particularly relevant to the back-to-the-land movement, of which he is himself a part. He is optimistic about the effects which the movement could have on life in this country: "The presence of a sizeable number of people living in this way would, I think, have a profound influence on the life of the country and of the world. They would augment the declining number of independent small landholders..., restore neglected and impoverished lands, ...reduce the crowdedness of the cities, ...keep land from being bought up by corporations. Over a number of years, by trial and error, they might invent a way of life that would be modest in its material means and necessities and yet rich in pleasures and meanings, kind to the land, intricately joined to the human community and to the natural world...."³⁷ These words define the hopes and the

possibilities which those people going back to the land take with them. Their credibility is enhanced by the fact that their author lives what he writes, responsibly undertaking the tasks necessary to live in the country today and rebuild America's agrarian culture. And in his responsibility, one can see the lightened possibility of freedom.

The vision of an ideal agrarian life has, especially since the time of Jefferson, been an integral part of American literature. Agrarian writers have realized that the interrelationship between people and the earth is a vitally important part of existence and that the agrarian life most directly represents man's dependence on and use of the earth. Consequently, life in the country, working with nature on a close basis, has been visualized as the potential fulfillment of man's ideals. We may have been expelled from Eden, but by going to the natural places and establishing residency, we can regain the innocence, peace, and happiness of an Edenic life. The possibilities for fulfillment in the rural countryside led Jefferson to work for the maintenance of an agrarian culture in America. Thoreau had the idea in mind when he walked out of Concord and went to live at Walden Pond. Bromfield kept the possibilities ahead of him when he took to restoring Malabar Farm. As Berry tends his Kentucky hillside homestead, he preserves and strengthens the idea of rural fulfillment. Like the idea of a perfect harvest in the mind of a farmer, the vision of an ideal agrarian life has lighted up in the minds of many American writers, and they have cultivated their vision just as assiduously in their writings as the farmer does his in his field.

The discrepancy, however, between the real and the ideal has caused the agrarian vision to remain unfulfilled. The forces of urbanization and industrialization in America have undermined rural life in most places and destroyed it in some.

As Leo Marx points out, the Machine's entrance into rural America has often left behind a garden of ashes. He insists that pastoral life in America is gone and that to cling to the "myth" is suicidal. He states that the realities of history must be acknowledged in literature; he credits writers such as Frost, Hemingway, Faulkner and West with having used the pastoral landscape as a symbol, but having recognized the dominant threat of industrialism.¹ Many critics in fields from literature to science to sociology agree with Marx's contentions; our agricultural past is outdated, they say, and the future belongs to technology. Some critics, while accepting the fate of an industrial future, believe that the agrarian ideal does serve as a kind of cultural myth which can be useful in explaining and interpreting the past. W. Thomas Inge says: "And if a myth is the expression of the general beliefs, the ethos of a social class or nation, it should be judged not according to its correspondence to reality but its facility for the expression of an accepted truth among a people of a particular time and place. The myth of the agrarian life serves this function admirably."² This view, although not condemning the agrarian ideal totally, still relegates it to a position of abstraction and antiquity. As far as these critics are concerned, the agrarian ideal has become an aged relic.

But people involved in the back-to-the-land movement have a habit of recycling, and they have found that the agrarian ideal, although a little worse for wear, is still able

to function well in present-day society. These people reject the idea that a technological future is inevitable; by moving into the country and establishing small farms, they are affirming an alternative which they feel is constructive and ecologically sound. Gurney Norman writes in The Last Whole Earth Catalog: "I believe that organic gardeners are in the forefront of a serious effort to save the world by changing man's orientation to it, to move away from the collective, centrist, super-industrial state, toward a simpler, realer one-to-one relationship with the earth itself."³ In other words, these people have seen the vision of the agrarian ideal and are trying to bring it down to the ground, to incorporate it into the reality of their own lives. In doing this, they are following concepts developed in American agrarianism. They are living on small homesteads and practicing self-sufficiency, seeking the independence and virtues which Jefferson said result from such a life. They are living with nature, simply and respectfully, as Thoreau did. They are restoring ruined farms and building up the soil on their land, using techniques furthered by Bromfield. And, like Berry, they are doing these things for the good of the world, sustaining themselves and their families, living their lives with the realization that the earth must be preserved for posterity.

Going back to the land today, asserting agrarian ideals in the face of the industrial monolith, raises certain questions. Is self-sufficiency really possible? Can one be free entirely from urban-industrial society, or is a certain degree

of dependence inevitable? With the exorbitant prices of land nowadays, is it feasible that many people can have their own homestead? Can organic agriculture, without using pesticides and artificial fertilizers, feed the mushrooming world population? Can city people with minimal agricultural expertise move to the country and hope to make a living? Or is this whole movement simply a romantic infatuation?

The answers to these questions are difficult ones and are still being sought by the back-to-the-land movement. More and more people are trying to be self-sufficient in as many areas as possible, especially in the area of food production. But some degree of dependency on other people, even on urban-industrial society, is generally by necessity tolerated. Total isolation is seen as impractical and undesirable. The land question is one which plagues many would be homesteaders. People usually save as much money as they can and buy lower-priced marginal lands instead of choice acreage. Jobs in the city must often be continued in order to finance the move to the country. Organic agriculture necessitates much individual attention and hand labor. As such, it is entirely workable for a small-scale garden or farm. In their present forms, large farms growing specialized crops and using big machinery and chemicals would have a difficult time going totally organic. But certainly many organic agricultural techniques could be employed to the benefit of food quality and of the land's health. China has shown that organic agriculture can feed a large population. As for inexperienced

city people attempting to farm, some schools around the country have begun to emerge which teach people the skills needed for homesteading. The how-to-live-on-the-land treatises of the last few years offer knowledge on everything from milking a goat to building a root cellar. And for the ultimate in worldly wisdom, the old farmer down the road can always be asked for advice. The questions facing the back-to-the-land movement have not been totally resolved, but they are being confronted directly and sincerely.

Perhaps the best defense one could offer for the back-to-the-land movement is that it provides happiness and satisfaction for a large number of people. Life in the country is not as idyllically care-free and simple as the "pastoral" ideal implies; in some ways, it is more complex and demanding than urban life, for it requires a strict adherence to practices and values which cohere to the nature of the earth. The tradition of agrarianism in American literature has served to define and illuminate the ideals of the back-to-the-land philosophy and has guaranteed that the agrarian life is a viable, healthy alternative in modern American society.

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Port. Thor., p. 370.

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Port. Thor., p. 275.

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Port. Thor., p. 386.

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Joel Porte, "Henry Thoreau: Society and Solitude,"
ESQ 19, No. 3 (1973), 131-139.

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Port. Thor., p. 546.

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- 21 Port. Thor., p. 445.
- 22 " p. 411.
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- 26 " p. 405.
- 27 " p. 406.
- 28 " pp. 410-411.
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Chapter Four

1
for a description of the late 19th century rural dilemma,
see: Agr. in Am. Lit., p. 109, and Agr. Trans. in Am., pp. 33-37.

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Anthology; and Robert Frost, North of Boston.

5 Hamlin Garland, Main-Travelled Roads (New York: New American Library, Inc., 1962), p. 61.

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8 Twelve Southerners, I'll Take My Stand, rpt. in Agr. in Am. Lit., p. 189.

9 James Hearst, "Reminiscences," The North American Review, 259, No. 3 (1974), p. 42. All further Hearst quotes will be from this source.

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16 David D. Anderson, Louis Bromfield (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), p. 153.

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18 Pleasant Valley, p. 88.

19 " p. 91.

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Chapter Five

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- 31 Farming, pp. 57-58.
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- 36 PoE, p. 303.
- 37 "Some Thoughts on Citizenship and Conscience," L-L House,
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Chapter Six

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- 2 Agr. in Am. Lit., p. 217.
- 3 "The Organic Gardening Books," The Last Whole Earth Catalog, p. 50.

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